



Crimson Wings by **kate langdon**

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Romance, Supernatural

Language: English

Characters: Billy H., Max M., OC, Steve H.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-12-18 16:41:45

Updated: 2019-08-05 17:22:35

Packaged: 2019-12-12 16:59:11

Rating: M

Chapters: 26

Words: 121,921

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Billy and Clare know Death. They know the stab of not being wanted. Maybe that's why they were drawn to each other. And on top of Neil's sadistic and sporadic abuse and Clare's nightmares that seem all too real, there are girls throughout all of Indiana going missing. How the f-ck does it all connect? (Billy/Steve's sister)

1. Princess

There are mentions of suicide throughout but there are no graphic depictions.

Ages:

- Clare, 16. 04/13/68
- Billy, 17. (I'm gonna say he was born in early October so he's only just turned 17) 10/02/67
- Steve, 18. (I'm guessing he's one of the oldest in his year if he's 18 in s2) 10/11/66
- Nancy, 17.
- Jonathan, 17.

Billy and Clare are both in the year below Steve, Nancy and Jonathan in high school. (EDIT (25/03/2019): after rewatching s2, I realise that nancy is supposed to be in the year below steve but it's too late to change my story now, and it doesn't really affect anything)

I have no editor/beta so sorry if there's any mistakes.

I hope you enjoy!

Crimson Wings

Chapter 1: Princess

Billy Hargrove, during her first sighting of him, had strolled into class with a wicked smile that Clare knew could ensnare her. But there was something off. She could see a ghost in his eyes, hidden ever so slightly under that wicked smile. A ghost which wasn't dead.

He hadn't paid attention to her. Not at all. And Clare was fine with that. Really. She didn't know if she could handle anymore ghosts.

A few weeks later though, things changed.

Wednesday 31st October 1984

She leant against the banister that wrapped along the outside of Tina's cabin, separate from all the other partygoers, with her head tilted up as she watched the stars blink against the ink sky. She was in all white. White gloves, white heels, and a white dress that appeared to be entirely made up of sequins and beads on thin strings, each reflecting the moonlight and making her glow. She was haunting, like a siren. And he was the sailor caught in a storm of teenage drunks being pulled toward her by the current.

That was the first time he saw her. He wanted her.

Billy walked up behind her, cocky as ever, chest still wet in places with beer. He admired her from behind, his heated eyes running up the length of her legs, enticed by the fishnets that clung to her flesh and disappeared under the beading of her dress.

"What'd you come as?" He asked, not really caring about the answer, he just wanted a pretty girl on his arm. An *easy* and pretty girl that would let him have some fun with her later.

She spun her head to him, fright evident as a small gasp left her parted crimson lips. He stood next to her, leaning his back onto the banister as a smirk grew onto his face.

"Hi." She said softly, as she fiddled with her gloves. Her eyes darted down to and then up from his wet chest.

He smirked.

"Hi." He said as his pink tongue dragged along his bottom lip. Her eyes were drawn to his moist lips before she darted her gaze back to the direction of the moon – even though her eyes now focused on the pale circle in the sky, Billy could tell her thoughts were only of him. He was the centre of her focus, the centre of her world in that moment. His smirk grew.

"Going to answer?" He asked, teasingly.

"What?" Her expression was cute; pouty lips and a small nose with big confused Bambi brown eyes. With those eyes, she really looked like a deer caught in headlights. Or a deer that had just noticed its predator. But there was something familiar in those eyes, evident to Billy even in his intoxicated state.

"What'd you come as?" He asked again, eyes sliding up her curves as he let his tongue lull out of his mouth to sit on his lower lip for a moment.

"Oh, I-I'm a flapper girl." She said, as she blinked dumbly and tugged at the end of her dress.

"A 'flapper girl'?" Billy's eyebrows drew together. "What're they?"

Her expression made it seem as though she'd said something wrong. Billy laughed a small sly chuckle at this expression, partly amused and partly to sooth her into letting her guard down. It had the desired effect and a cautious smile grew on her face.

"It's what party girls from the 1920s were called." She shrugged.

"Party girls, huh?" He smirked, cruelly, knowing the effect he had on her as he inched closer to her.

She nodded. She backed away as his form closed in until her back hit the wall of the cabin. She was in the corner, wedged between the wall and banister. She was trapped.

"What are you dressed as?" She asked in a small voice.

"Me?" He smiled a cruel, sinful smile. "I'm Billy Hargrove."

"I know who you are." She let out a short laugh and smiled sweetly. "We have a few classes together. So, you're not dressed as anyone then?"

"I told ya." He said as he creped closer to her sweet scent. "I'm Billy."

Billy watched as her tongue swiftly ran over her lips. He wondered if she tasted as good as she smelled. He placed his hand on the wall next to her head, trapping her with both his imposing figure and his

blue eyes. Billy knew the effect he had on women, and he regularly abused this power.

"What do you want?" She was brave to ask that question.

"To be friends." The lie was light on his lips and he inwardly sniggered. If he told her of the things he wanted from her, she'd run away, scandalised and offended. Or maybe she'd be into it, but that was a risk he wasn't willing to take on this small-town hick.

A breeze carried over the frosty October air and she visibly shivered, reminding them both of how little clothing she was wearing; the little white dress her only real armour against the frigid air. Billy wondered whether she shivered because of the breeze or because of his gaze. He reasoned that it could be both, but his gut was sure it was because of him.

"You look awful cold." He hummed as he leaned in and rested his hand on the hot flesh of the space between her neck and shoulder. "Wanna go warm up inside?"

Her tongue wet her lips again which drew Billy's gaze to her moistened red lips.

"Clare?" A familiar voice came from behind them.

Billy turned to find Harrington stood sternly and forbidding with hands on hips, shooting him a glare full of fury.

"Harrington," Billy greeted as he took a step back from the girl.

Harrington glowered at him. Then it clicked. Her brown eyes had seemed familiar to Billy and now he knew why. The same brown eyes were now shooting daggers at him. They were related. His cocky smirk didn't dare to leave his face as leant back against the banister, leaving *Clare* to bare Harrington's full scrutiny.

"You guys are twins?" He looked back and forth at them, playing with them both.

"No," She said as she shook her head twice. "We're 18 months apart."

"Clare, come on." Steve said firmly as he tried to ignore Billy. "We're going home."

"Where's Nancy?" She asked, tone rising at the end in question.

Billy swiftly surveyed their surroundings; the bitch Harrington came with was nowhere to be seen. Judging by Clare's question, they'd come together, but now they were leaving as a twosome rather than as a threesome. Billy smirked, armed with new ammo.

"What happened to your Queen, Harrington?" He smirked. "Did she get tired of your bitching? Or was it your floppy hair that did it?"

The anger in his gaze nearly made Billy chuckle, but he held it in, not wanting to alert Clare to the fact that he was thoroughly enjoying tormenting her brother. *If looks could kill*, Billy thought, smugly.

"Screw off, Hargrove." He ironed out. "Come on, Clare."

She walked toward Harrington then, so Billy grabbed at her wrist, pulling her back to him.

"I could give you a *ride*," He murmured into her ear, knowing that her brother could still hear what he was saying. "And after that, a ride home as well."

Something in him gleamed when he saw her mouth and eyes widen, cheeks stained red as she became aware of the double entendre.

Harrington stomped forward, breaking them apart and getting in Billy's face. He smiled, enjoying the threat of violence. Their chests almost touched, and Billy's knuckles itched to bruise and beat into the King's poster boy face. Billy lapped this feeling up; the almost tangible feel of the calm before the storm.

"Steve, stop." Clare pulled him away.

Other teens had taken interest in the commotion, turning their heads with bated breaths, alcohol in red cups forgotten for the moment.

Clare pulled Harrington away from him.

Harrington and his sister walked away, through the crowd that was starting to make noise again despite the disappointment on some of their faces that there was no fight to be had. They started to dance again, music vibrating the ground and loud voices replacing the tense almost-silence from before cheered for those who were drunk enough to do keg stands. Though he was sure none of them would beat their new Keg King.

Clare looked back at him before she disappeared into the rowdy crowd, expression unreadable to Billy. In that moment, her pale ethereal skin contrasted with her dark eyes, intensifying both shades of light and dark. Billy's drunk mind couldn't decipher why she was so appealing to him. He couldn't figure out why she reminded him of both the light of the moon and the darkness of night.

He told himself: *there's plenty of bitches in the sea*, before going to off to chase some other tail, smirk and chest drawing them in like moths to the flame. But for the rest of the party, he was unable to rid himself of thoughts of those liquid warm eyes.

...

Sunday 4th November 1984

Clare

"Get away from the windows!" I said, looking over to where the kids were. None of them moved, too engrossed by Steve and Hargrove's figures moving closer together. I knew that if Hargrove saw Max with any of us, it would end badly. God, I hoped it wouldn't end badly.

I strode over to the window and peered over to where Hargrove stood. He was gesturing with his hands, blowing smoke into Steve's face. Hargrove pointed towards the window, cigarette acting as his pointer finger.

I backed away and the kids ducked.

"Shit!" Dustin cursed.

"Well, I did say to get away from the window." I said, lips pursed, and eyebrows drawn together. I looked back to where Steve was to see his

form being shoved down onto the concrete by Hargrove.

Fuck.

I ran to the door, swung it open to see Hargrove's foot coming down onto Steve in a harsh thrust.

"Hey!" I shouted, making quick strides to where they were. "Don't touch him!"

"I guess I am dreaming!" He looked down at my brother. "Not only the King but also the Princess! How lucky am I, huh?" He started walking towards me, until we met in the middle.

I looked to Steve who was still on the ground clutching at his stomach. Hargrove got closer until all I could see was his arresting figure now standing directly in front of my shorter stature. The scent of smoke and sweat and cheap cologne filled my senses. The courage that I'd had to come out here and face Billy drained from me in that moment.

"Why're you here, Princess?" He starred down at me like I was prey, like I was something to eat, and he was starved. He reached to my chin, grabbed it and forced my face up to look up to his. "You look so scared. That's so..." He looked toward the house, trying to figure out what word he liked best. "...cute."

He let go of my chin harshly and shoved into my shoulder as he walked past.

"Hargrove!" I called after him as I took a step in his direction.

"Don't worry, Princess!" He looked back at me, a strange mix of mirth and agitation in his eyes. "I'm only here for my bitch sister."

"Can't she just stay for a while?" My voice wavered, but Hargrove ignored me as he carried on over to the Byers' door and swung it open.

I ran to Steve, trying to help him up. He clutched his stomach, face wrinkled in pain, but I could tell he was trying to mask it.

"I'll get up now." He said, voice strained. "Just get to the kids."

I heard the door slam shut. I turned and went for the house.

Just as I entered I saw Hargrove yank Lucas up by his jacket as the others shouted for him to stop. I bolted around the corner to where they struggled. Lucas was dangling from where Hargrove held him. Lucas was all skin and bone – the complete opposite to Hargrove's taller and muscular figure. Seeing Lucas next to Hargrove made him seem impossible to stop.

I sprung towards them, my hands gripped onto Hargrove's shoulder trying to rip him away from the kid. Hargrove's toned arm shot out at my face, pushing me away causing me to fall back onto the dining table. Plates and cups fell off the table, cracking and shattering as they hit the ground. My hip had collided with the table, making me grimace in pain.

"Since Maxine won't listen to me, maybe you will." Hargrove's voice was low and predatory as he threatened Lucas. "You stay away from her. Stay! Away from her. You hear me?"

"I said 'get off me'!" The kid cried as he kneed Hargrove's balls. Hargrove stumbled back a few feet and let out an animalistic grunt. I could see Steve making his way through the door, pace quick and face stony.

"You are so dead, Sinclair!" Hargrove fixed his seething glare onto Lucas. "You're dead."

Steve grabbed his shoulder and yanked Billy so that he faced him.

"No." Steve said, face flat. "You are."

Hargrove's figure flew to the side as Steve swung at him, giving Lucas enough time to run to the arms of his friends, but Hargrove's feet were planted enough for him not to fall over. Hargrove started to laugh a crazed wild chortle. It was as if Steve punching him was the funniest thing that had happened to him in a long time. He took pleasure in violence.

I was getting flashbacks of when Steve came home bruised and

bloodied from a fight with Jonathan Byers. If he couldn't handle *Jonathan Byers*, how would he handle *Billy bloody Hargrove*?

"Looks like you got some fire in you after all, huh?!" Hargrove looked half mad as he waved his hand around, grinning at Steve with blood dripping from his nose. "I've been waiting to meet this *King Steve* everyone's been telling me so much about!"

Hargrove took a step towards Steve, so I hurriedly got between them.

"Stop!" I held my hands up to Hargrove. "Just stop. *Don't* hurt each other."

I looked back and forth between them. Steve was looking over my head to Hargrove, his face stern and calculating. Hargrove gave me a look of annoyance like I had stolen a toy from him. The hunger I'd seen from earlier hadn't left. Stood this close to him now, I thought that I could see another bruise blooming on his cheek bone, but Steve hadn't given him this one.

"Coming to his rescue, huh Princess?" Hargrove's breath came out in a wave and it stroked my skin. The scent of cigarettes on his breath and clothes nearly made me gag.

"Just go, Hargrove." I looked up at him. "Okay?"

"Get out." Steve grunted.

"Okay, okay," Hargrove raised his palms in surrender as his open-mouthed smirk slid onto his face. "You got me, Princess. I'll leave..."

My breath left me. My forehead creased. It wouldn't be that simple, would it?

"...if... Max leaves with me." He said. Of course, it wouldn't be that simple.

Behind us, the boys were in an uproar. They shouted and cursed, they wouldn't let Hargrove take Max, but Hargrove wouldn't leave without her.

Hargrove's expression was dangerous and measured, almost like he

knew that Max wouldn't leave without a fight. He was right.

Hargrove strode with quick forceful steps to the group of kids, but Steve acted quicker than anyone else, grabbing onto Hargrove's shirt and throwing him onto the kitchen table. Bottles fell onto the floor which left glass everywhere. More plates fell. The table creaked with Hargrove's weight. He got up and walked over to Steve. I knew that any chance of stopping a fight was over.

The silence was stunning. Then Hargrove struck.

...

Thursday 15th November 1984

Hargrove and I were each other's assigned lab partners. We had to work together until February, then present our findings in a paper, and give a presentation to our teacher. I could tell that working with him was going to be awful.

It had been two weeks since that night. Since I'd learnt about demo-whatevers and telepathy and top-secret government facilities and cover-ups. Two weeks since Billy Hargrove had beaten my brother to a pulp, only stopped by Max, a needle and threats of a nail-filled baseball bat. And now here he sat, next to me at our assigned desk near the back of the class. I could see the scabs littered on his fingers from when he'd torn up Steve's face.

Our stools stood faced slightly away from each other and the air held awkwardness and frustration. I was obviously still seething over what he'd done two weeks ago. I had asked Max if things had gotten worse with Hargrove since that night, and to my surprise she'd told me that they'd gotten somewhat better. But I knew there was something about Hargrove that she wasn't telling me. I guessed he wasn't being as crazy or as much of an asshole in school lately – or it at least seemed that way. I supposed that waking up in the Byers house to Hopper and Joyce was quite the literal wake-up call.

"We gonna start now?" Hargrove's deep and gravel-like voice questioned.

The bruise looked like it was healing nicely.

"If you want." I said as I looked at him, the faded greenish bruise on his temple and cheek bone were lit up by the sterile lights that hung from the ceiling.

"Uh... I'll go get the beaker and the uh, temperature thing." He said.

"A thermometer." I said.

"What?" He shrugged, nonplussed.

"The 'temperature thing'." I said, lightly amused before deciding to correct him. "It's called a thermometer."

"Oh." His expression went blank. "Yeah, I'll get that."

Hargrove stood from his stool and adjusted his jeans as he walked to the supplies at the front of the classroom. The girls sat on the desk behind started to giggle and snigger, no doubt pleased with Hargrove's appearance.

"Hey, Clare." One of them whispered.

I turned around, eyebrows raised in question as I looked at Gloria and Betty. These girls were known for their love of gossip. I'd been friends with Gloria before – until she began spreading rumours about why my parents were never home. But that was in eighth grade, so it hardly mattered anymore. We never really spoke at all since, so I wondered what she could want.

"Oh my gosh, Clare! We're so jealous." Betty said, her eyes alight and full of girlish longing.

"Of what?" I asked, eyebrows drawing together slightly.

"Of you and Billy." Gloria said and I watched the gum bounce around behind her lips as she spoke.

"Of me... and *him*?" I said. What the hell could they be thinking?

"Just look at his ass." Her eyes found where Hargrove was picking the

equipment up. I felt my gaze travel over his long legs, to his well-shaped butt, then his broad shoulders. I felt my cheeks growing hotter. I couldn't help but remember him when he'd cornered me at the Halloween party. The way he'd acted had sent shivers down my spine. His hot gaze had made my mouth go dry and his hand had come to rest on my skin. He'd seemed charming until Steve had shown up. Hargrove had turned into a dick and had tried to provoke Steve into a fight. Perhaps that was when Betty and Gloria had seen us and added 2 and 2 only to conclude that the answer was 5.

"What're you jealous of?" I asked, incredulous as I pull my eyes away from Hargrove to face them again. "He's a dick."

"And what a beautiful one he must have." Betty said in a dazed voice.

I could practically see the drool coming from both of their mouths. I wondered how she could she talk about his... thing... so openly like that.

"So, you two aren't together or anything?" Gloria asked.

"What?" I asked. "No! Ew, God no!"

They looked at each other, both giving false expressions of worried guilt, but I could see the thrill in their eyes. They loved drama, especially when it was of their own engineering. What stupid shit had they cooked up now?

"But we heard..." Gloria started, faux worry laced her annoying voice.

"Heard what?" I demanded. It would only be a few seconds or so before Hargrove found the right equipment and strolled back over.

"Everyone's been saying it." Betty continued. "That something happened between you and Billy, and that was why him and Steve had that fight. Steve was, like, totally defending your honour or whatever."

"Totally." Gloria said as she blew a pink bubble between her lips.

"Umm, no." I shook my head. "Whose bat-shit crazy idea was that?"

"What bat-shit crazy idea?" Hargrove's voice came from behind.

My breath caught in my throat as I span my head towards him. Betty and Gloria giggled but surprisingly came to my rescue.

"Oh, nothing! Just girl stuff, Billy." Gloria smiled innocently.

"Yeah, girl stuff." Betty's eyelashes fluttered in a ridiculous way.

Were they trying to flirt? I shuddered internally. But for some reason it made me quite annoyed... frustrated, even. I shouldn't be angry with them trying to flirt with Hargrove. Disgusted, yes, but not angry. A nagging voice that pulled at the back of my head whispered something about jealousy, but I didn't want to listen.

Hargrove smiled his cocky smirk which put his perfectly white and straight teeth on show as he set down the beaker and thermometer on our desk. If this were some Loonie Toons cartoon, their hearts would be beating out of their chests right now.

"Girl stuff, huh?" He gave me a pointed look, the mirth clear in his eyes as he turned from the girls and sat in his stool. He inched closer to me as he spoke; "What kind of girl stuff?"

"None of your business." My lips pursed. "Just pass the temperature thing."

"Thermometer." His smirk grew.

"What?" I said.

"I think it's called a thermometer." He'd realised that he had caught me out and was now trying to exploit that fact.

"Pass me the... *thermometer*." I gave in, rolling my eyes.

"What's the magic word?" He purred.

"Please." I ironed out as I glared at him, not wanting to continue playing his game. It was *his* game after all, meaning the only one who could win was himself. Bastard.

His pretty smirk turned into a full-blown smile. An actual smile. Not one of his sly grins. If I were Gloria or Betty, I'd even say he looked handsome.

"Here you go," He slyly said while he passed me the thermometer. I tried to ignore the brushing of fingers that I knew he'd done on purpose. I tried to ignore the slight burning sensation when his cold skin touched mine. And the fire that still licked my skin even after we were no longer touching.

"Princess."

...

Thanks for reading!

2. Mother

Chapter 2: Mother

*'Her name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face.' – Othello, Shakespeare*

19th November 1984

I walked along the dark corridors of my house, not knowing where my feet were taking me. The blue darkness of the claustrophobic hallways seemed to moan as they closed in on me, angled me and directed me to my destination, of which I was not certain of yet. However, I was certain that I couldn't stop walking. It was as though I was being pulled by some unseen force. I could not yet discern the nature of this force; was it cruel, or could I trust it?

From the start of the hallway, where I was cautiously walking on the tips of my bare toes, I could see something floating just beyond the balcony. I gravitated toward it, where the balcony overlooked the stairs and the front section of the entrance.

Once I reached the end of the hallway, I saw that dust was dancing in the light provided by the moon, and there was no figure there. It had been the dust and darkness playing and distorting my mind. But I was certain there had been someone there, someone as real and as tangible as you or me. The cold sent a shiver down my spine that felt like fingers stroking me lightly. I turned, and again was met with nothing, only the darkened hallway greeted me.

I hear a sort of groaning noise – but that could easily be explained as Steve snoring from his bedroom down the hallway. The black wood of the house carried on creaking and moaning as if telling me to move again, leave my spot by the balcony, but I couldn't.

I called out; '*mother*', but no sound escaped my lips. I called it several times, unsure of my reasoning, but there was no change, no disruption to the unnerving yet soft silence. I turned back to the dust lightly falling in the air and called out '*mother*' once more. I didn't

know what I expected to happen, or who I expected to reply. My mother was in New York right now, keeping dad from cheating on her.

Pain grasped at my stomach, I clutched it tight as I rolled onto my pillow. My breath escaped me as I realised that it had been a dream. I lay, smoothing the cramp in my belly as I tried to regulate my breathing once more. Once the pain had stopped, I rose my hand to my forehead, feeling the dampness of sweat there. I threw the covers off my boiling body, feeling sick with fever.

The air hit my legs and waist, making it feel cold... and *wet*. The white fabric of my silk nightie felt heavy against my skin. I didn't want to look down. A thousand tiny spider legs went scuttling down my back. I held onto my sheets, they bunched under my fingers. My muscles tensed, my chest tightened, my stomach quivered. I felt sick as copper filled my nostrils. I didn't want to look. I didn't want to... I didn't want to...

My eyes made their traitorous decent and in the edges of my sight I could see red. Crimson covered my pale flesh. I glanced down, unnerved to see that my legs and the sheets surrounding them were red with blood.

The weirdness of my dream was forgotten now, replaced with the uncomfortable sticky slosh of drying blood.

...

I hadn't bleed that much onto my bedsheets since the first time I'd gotten my period, but the weird thing about this morning was that the bleeding had stopped. It seemed to have only gone on whilst I was sleeping. Also, once I had showered and changed and washed the sheets, I had looked at my calendar to find that I was 13 days early. I had never been earlier than 3 days before. And I had never spotted, so this morning had been, to say the least, *unusual*.

I was in the school gym now, watching the sun set from the small rectangular windows at the top of the tall peach colored stone walls. I pulled at my cheerleading skirt, and then tugged at my pony tail to tighten it as my nerves were setting in.

It was darker earlier in the evenings now as the November month moved Hawkins into Winter. I would have welcomed the change, as I had every year until now, but... truth be told, I was still scared of what the kids called *the upside down* and all the monsters that hid within it. I wished that I hadn't gone down there with Steve and the kids, and instead just stayed in Hargrove's Camaro. That way, I wouldn't have nightmares or think that I see things lurk in the shadows of my house.

Anyway, Steve had agreed to take Dustin to the pet store to get Dustin's mom a new cat. It would be a welcome surprise for her considering that her old cat had been eaten by Dustin's demodog – or as Dustin called him: Dart.

Long story, short; this meant that I would not be getting a ride home tonight. I would have to walk, alone in the dark. And having seen what I had in the darkness of the upside down, nothing frightened me more.

I think my coach could tell that something was wrong because she had told me to stay behind after practice. So, I of course stayed. We talked – she talked, I listened – to her lecture about team spirit and how we are as good as our worst member – meaning *me*. How comforting of her to point that out. At the end of the lecture, I gave her one of my fake smiles, the ones I had practiced for family photos so that when people came to visit the house and saw pictures of us, we wouldn't look like a broken family. Though, I don't think 'family' is the right word for it. We were more like a troupe, like one of those troupes that travel around and perform plays and stories. But these performances of tales, like my 'family', were often exaggerated and fake. Of course, I have Steve, but we've only really been close in the last year or so. He'd grown up during his relationship with Nancy, so he'd been more accepting of his weird little sister.

By the time I had made it to the changing rooms, there were only a few girls remaining, the ones whose appearance were most important to them. They liked to take extra care with their hair. I could hear them chatting and laughing. I used to be one of them, but since Carol turned into a bitch, I realised how fake most of them were.

"Oh my God! Did you guys hear?!" One of them (Betty, I think)

squealed.

I rolled my eyes as I opened my locker, removing my bag. There was a wall of lockers separating me from the showers, so they hadn't seen me.

"About what?" One asked

I had been quiet coming in, so they hadn't heard me, this was evident with their next words.

"About Clare!" Betty carried on. "She's, like, totally doing it with Billy! Ugh, fucking bitch."

My eyes widened.

"Ha! So that prissy little bitch finally lost her virginity?" Carol's voice rung out.

"What a slut!" Someone said. Calling *me* a slut? Very rich coming from them. "Only dirty girls go with Billy."

"I thought you wanted to go with him," Gloria fired back.

"Yeah, but... it's Billy! Who doesn't want to do it with him."

I rolled my eyes at her logic.

"Anyway," Betty started again. "she basically told me and Gloria in science class the other day. And Steve totally found out and that's why they were both covered in bruises."

I picked my stuff up, determined to leave this shit show. I stormed out of the locker room, too pissed to give a shit if they heard me or not. I strode into the corridor, tears in my eyes that I desperately didn't want to fall. I wouldn't cry over them. Not after last time. I wouldn't. Not again. I took a shaky breath as I tried to calm myself. I realised that I still had my cheer uniform on, it would be too cold to wear on the walk home.

No one should be using the boys' locker room, I thought, it should be fine to change in there.

...

Once I got to the boys' locker room, I glanced about frightfully. I did not want to be caught changing, nor did I want to catch anyone else partially dressed or even naked. I shuddered at the thought of seeing a boy's *thingy*. Gross.

After a quick once over, I determined that the locker room was empty, thankfully. It had nothing but rows of lockers and showers. The orange tile made it so much brighter than the girls pale pink tile. The lack of gossip and giggling was also a bonus.

I was still angry as I sat onto the cold metal bench. I huffed as I pulled out my jeans, but then my shampoo and towel fell out along with the rest of my stuff. Great. I looked to the left to see the empty showers. It was much cleaner than I had expected to see the boys' room.

I looked to my towel and shampoo on the floor, my skin itched to be clean.

I tidied my area, ready to make a quick exit if anyone came in. Then I undressed. I felt vulnerable in this new area, like I could be pounced on any minute. I knew now that this place was empty, but I still couldn't shake the feeling of being watched as I exposed my breasts to the frigid air. I brought my fluffy towel around me, and quickly headed over to the shower, shampoo in hand.

I turned the faucet on, putting my hand under the water until it was the right temperature. The shower stalls weren't like in the girls' room. They were very open, and non-discrete, leaving no barrier between the locker room and the shower area.

I hung my towel onto the hook, trying to muster up confidence. As I stepped under the showers warmth, the tears that had earlier threatened to spill, came again. This time, I didn't care if they fell. The water would hide them, I thought, as my head went under the scorching spray. I wasn't crying over what they had said – I knew those things weren't true – I was more upset about letting their words get to me.

I lathered my hair with the shampoo, letting the suds spread down my back, tickling my skin as they went. The warm water came over me like a calming influence. I stayed there, eyes closed, until the tears stopped falling.

I must have been there about 10 minutes or so before I heard the door slam shut.

My head jerked to the side, my breath caught in my throat. I pulled my towel off the hook and around my shoulders.

"Hello?" I called out.

I turned the faucet off, so that I could hear more clearly.

"Is anyone in here?" I called again.

A full minute passed by with no answer, the dust in the light was swirling lightly, but other than that, there was no other movement. I felt bubbles sliding down my scalp, itching to be rinsed away. So, I put my towel back with one last glance to the room before turning the faucet back on. I raised my hands to continue washing my hair, feeling bubbles run down my skin. Another minute passed before I again relaxed and closed my eyes.

"That's quite the show." A male voice sounded from the side.

I jerked my head over to where *he* was stood. My hands went to cover my private areas. The fucking bastard. He was stood next to my bag a few feet away, the fingers of his left hand covering his eyes. The smirk along with what he'd said told me that he'd seen all he wanted to see. The hand covering his eyes was just him playing innocent.

"Get out!" I squealed. "You fucking pig! Get out!"

He didn't move. I took the opportunity to scramble for my towel, knowing that he could probably see through the cracks of his long fingers.

"How come I have to leave?" He asked, his tone of voice suggesting that he was about to say something glib. "This is the boys room after

all."

I wrapped my towel around me, it was getting wet from the spray.

"You done?" Hargrove asked, though I got the idea he didn't care about the answer.

This sentiment was reinforced when he uncovered his face (even when I hadn't answered yet) and then proceeded to take his shirt off.

"Woah! Woah, Hargrove!" I held my hands up, trying not to look at his flawlessly sun kissed skin.

"What, Princess?" He removed his blue jeans, leaving him in just his underwear and socks. "I have every right to be here."

My eyes roamed over his body. I took in the hard planes of his chest; his skin was slightly damp with sweat, he was toned, muscular, hard. His looked firm, smooth and supple as silk. He noticed that I was transfixed by him, and looked down at me with arrogant eyes. I tried not to look at him.

He pulled off his socks, while doing so I noticed the muscles around his body flex and move under his flesh. His arms looked strong. I felt my heart beat faster beneath my breast, words of protest were long forgotten.

He moved his hands to his boxer shorts. That's when my eyes snapped back to his blue ones. His eyes were swimming with a primal hunger. His smirk was full of mischief. He was *bad*.

Once he was naked, he started to walk over to the shower next to mine. I looked to the faucet that was eye level. The water was still running over me, making the towel wet and heavy under my arms.

I could feel his eyes on me. I glanced up to him, his gaze held me to him. Hargrove moved closer now, seeking the warmth from my shower.

"Hargrove-" I gasped, softly.

"Call me Billy." I could feel his voice vibrate on my skin.

"Billy... what are you... what are you doing?" I looked to his lips.

"What I want." He inched his head to mine.

He pressed his lips to the corner of my mouth, my eyes shut. My body tensed. His mouth carried on trailing down to my neck, sucking and biting, tugging on my flesh. Each time he got further and further, only to travel back up my neck to gently kiss the corner of my mouth. I could only move to put my hands in his wild hair, holding on as he continued his gentle assault on my skin. My breathing got deeper and louder, harder to control. I knew Billy could hear the effect he had on me.

He found a sweet spot just under the left of my jaw, I moaned. He sucked, and played with the flesh there. I moaned again, and he growled in response. My grip on his hair tightened and I gasped as he held onto my hips pulling mine against his. I could feel only hardness press against me through the towel.

When he reached my collarbone, he nipped at the flesh there, sending shocks down my spine. The deep wet heat I felt building up in between my legs was all at once unbearable. I needed him there. I needed his rough touch to press against me, fill me, turn me inside out with skilled hands.

He reached the edge of the towel, licking long strokes between the top of my breasts. His hands now left my hips, trailing from behind my knees to under the towel, up to my bum. As his hands massaged the skin he found, his mouth massaged the tops of my breasts, begging for the towel to be removed.

My hands went to his back feeling the muscles move from under his skin as he continued to ravage me.

"Billy..." I moaned. "Take it off..."

"Say my name again and I will." I could feel his smirk against my skin.

"Billy." I complied, moaning his name with wanton abandonment.

He removed the towel, hands roaming over my skin, claiming

territory as they went. His mouth went to my nipple. I arched my back, gasping as he lolled his tongue out against the sensitive skin. I had touched my nipples before, but I'd never felt anything as good as this.

I hummed when he suckled at the tip, then rolled and swished his tongue over it. He did the same to the other one all the while his hands were traveling across my body. I couldn't keep track of his hands on my body.

He stole my breath when he pushed us together and back against the tile, his member brushing against my leg. It was hard as it rubbed up my thigh. Just the thought of it so close to my centre made me tremble in anticipation.

His head went lower, my hands came to tangle in his hair. He sucked along my stomach and my sides, making my knees tremble.

"Billy..." I gasped as he went lower. "What are you doing?"

His blue eyes locked with mine, hunger had dilated them, making them look like obsidian. Something like recognition flickered in them for the briefest of moments. Did he figure out how inexperienced I was?

"Just, trust me." He murmured into my skin, making it vibrate.

He parted my folds. His lips wrapped around a nub of flesh. He played with it, flicked it from side to side expertly. He lifted one of my legs to the top of his shoulder where he knelt on the floor. He suckled at the nub, teething it. My head went back.

"Billy!" I whined.

He grunted into my skin, vibrations adding to the ecstasy.

I saw his eyes closed, as he ate at my skin. His tongue was long and soft as he licked long firm strokes up my slit. I saw his head moving as slowly as his tongue. My hands went to his shoulders for balance. I tried to move further as my legs began to burn, but I was tied down by invisible cords.

I felt tension building inside me, waiting to burst. Billy brought his hand from my leg around to my entrance slipping two fingers inside. He was first met with opposition though and a slightly pained gasped from me. He continued suckling as he decided that one finger would suffice. For now.

He was sucked into my vagina. His finger felt like mine had when I had experimented except it was longer and thicker and more experienced. I felt my walls tremble as he began to do a come-hither motion. His finger curled again and again, and I saw spots of white in my vision.

I whined. I was about to burst with Billy's tongue and finger working at me so furiously. Then, another finger was added.

I exploded. A tear rolled down from my eye. My hands scratched at his shoulders', leaving small pale lines, some white, others red with blood. I'd seen too much blood today. For a split second of terror, I thought about what would happen if I had started bleeding when Billy was eating me out. But then he stood up as I was catching my breath, his mouth and hand bloodless. He saw the tear that was now at the top of my cheek and licked it away, making the corners of mouth turn upward in a smile. He put his hands on either side of my face.

"You've never done this before, right?" He asked, voice low and laced with arousal.

I could feel his member bob against my leg as I shook my head. The water was still running behind us. It hopefully covered up the noise of my moaning.

"I'll tell you how this works." His eyes were dark as they looked at me, predatory. "It's my turn now."

My mouth opened in a small 'o' shape. I blinked. *His turn.* My eyes widened.

"What do I do?" I looked up to his ocean eyes, for some reason feeling like I would have anything for him in that moment.

"Get on your knees." He ordered.

I looked down between us. His member was dripping with both water and a white substance. I felt hands on my shoulders gently guide me to my knees. The tops of Billy's fingertips held me in place next to his hard organ. It pulsed before me, twitched expectantly. Fluid welled at the tip, veins throbbed.

Without waiting for instruction, I reached out to it. I wrapped one hand around it, it twitched in my palm. It felt heavy and firm as I moved my hand slowly up and down. I looked up to see Billy's eyes had shut. His mouth was shut, his nostrils flared when my hand moved to the tip. He moved to place his arms onto the wall above me.

I played with the tip, using the warm wet substance as lubricant to help my hand move with more fluidity. Billy groaned now, head leaning back as I experimented. I continued with my slow pace, stroking, tugging and pulling.

The build-up of fluid coming from the tip was making the space between my legs ache to be touched again.

I turned my hand a certain way causing Billy to groan. He reached down to my hands, placing his right hand on top, increasing the speed. He then grabbed my wrist and held my palm to my mouth.

"Spit on your hand." He demanded. I did as he said, spitting out a wad of spit of my palm.

He then put my hand on his member and used his hand over mine to guide it up and down his length. I gathered that Billy needed something wet and warm to cum.

He looked at me as I brought my other hand to my entrance, getting it covered in my own fluid. I then brought it to his cock, using it to quicken the pace. His eyes got darker, going from ocean blue to midnight in a second. He grunted again.

I swallowed, licking my lips as another idea sprung to mind. As I massaged the bottom of his shaft, I brought my wet lips to his tip. I

kissed it at first. His hips twitched forward. I kissed it again, but slowly this time as I gradually opened my mouth. I took the tip of him in. He bit his lip to keep in his howl. His hand came away from mine to join the other one in my hair. He held tight whilst I sucked him further in. My hands were still working at most of his length and as they moved up, they met my mouth. I was able to get half of him in. I sucked and licked and bobbed. I could taste salt and hear his heart beat. I could tell his self-control was withering by the second as his hips began to thrust at me.

"Hold onto my hips." He grunted. I did as he said.

He held my head in place, grip firm on my hair, as he started to push forward. My eyes widened as he hit the back of my throat. He was still trying to go deeper. I made a panicked noise in the back of my throat.

"Take... it in." He told me.

He started to move his hips back and forth at a brisk pace. He hit the back of my throat multiple times. He moaned and grunted. My eyes watered. It seemed like he nudged his way in deeper with each thrust.

I patted his hips in panic again. I needed to breath.

"Breath through your nose." He told me, as if he'd known my problem all along.

I started to breathe through my nose, which helped me to relax some. But Billy was still going way too fast for me. The ridges of his cock washed through my mouth. My drool mixed with his pre-cum was dripping down my chin, tickling its way down the sensitive skin of my neck. My hands gripped onto his firm butt cheeks to help me hold onto him. My eyes still watered, this was almost too much for me.

"Keep going... sweet mouth... sweet girl..." He seemed lost in his euphoria.

It made me think of when he had moaned and hummed against my skin. I wanted to see if I got the same response, so I started to moan

around him, to which he responded with a guttural groan.

"Gonna cum," he moaned. "Swallow it."

My lips sucked harder at him, trying to swallow his member, eager to see what happens when a man comes. I tried to swallow and suck him up like he said to do, but this became increasingly hard when he was brushing against my gag reflex.

Then, his thighs and butt cheeks tensed. Something hot shot out at the back of my throat surprising me. I tried to draw back but Billy's hand in my hair wouldn't let me. Was this what he meant by swallow? *Oh.*

I looked up to Billy, his teeth grit together, nostrils flared as he stared intensely at where we were joined. He continued to shoot strings of that hot liquid into my mouth, I struggled to swallow all of it. He let out a whimper as the last of it came.

His length started to deflate in my mouth, then he pulled away to go stand under the spray of the shower. I was left on my knees, with a mouth full of cum that was leaking down my chin and neck. I admired his bum from behind him as I stood. I had left crescent moon indentations in his skin from where I had dug my nails in. I swallowed the last of what was in my mouth, the salty slime coating my throat.

"Billy..." I took a step forward.

He ignored me. I said his name again, touching his shoulder, trying to get his attention. I'd heard stories of girls having sex with their boyfriends who in the moment, were the perfect gentleman, but afterwards, after they had gotten what wanted, they would treat the girl like shit. But this was different; Billy Hargrove was not my boyfriend, nor was he a gentleman. It would only make sense for him to treat me exactly as he always had; like something to play with. He could easily cast me aside now.

What had been thinking? I came in here to escape the rumours about Hargrove and I doing it, only to wind up exactly as the rumours had branded me. A slut.

I gently placed my hand on his shoulder. He turned to me, his eyes a quiet storm of clear ocean blue. He looked down at his cum that was gradually making its way down to my breasts. He smirked, looking down at his work as a smug artist would. My hand dropped from his shoulder, both hands coming to cover my breasts.

He grabbed both my wrists, pulling under the spray of the shower. I wondered how much water we'd wasted. He moved my hands back to my sides before washing his mess off me with warm hands. His hands smoothed over my neck and chin, moving in small soothing circles. He moved them down to my collarbones, then to my breasts where he only lightly touched my nipples. My eyes closed in complete calm, my head leant back.

We both stood there, naked and wet, as the water washed the scent of sex from our bodies.

...

Wow, Billy and Clare move fast. I swear I didn't intend to write that scene until much later...

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! And I hope you all had a great Christmas! Please leave a review if you have the time 😊

I'm changing the title soon, though I'm not sure what to go with. The title 'Billy' is just a bit ugh, so I was thinking of changing it to 'Chasing a Butterfly' or 'Brown Butterfly' or something along those lines. If you guys have any ideas don't be afraid to drop a review.

I was so damn happy when I saw that I got a couple reviews, 1 favourite and 11 follows! Thank you so much 3

CupcakeCobra: thank you! And I will try to not leave huge gaps of time between posting. Thanks for reviewing!

3CHOES: I'm definitely going with making her 'strange', thanks for the input lol . Also, I can't wait to see where I go with this too coz I haven't written much, but what I have written seems... interesting, I guess. Hope u enjoy it. Thanks for reviewing!

3. Road Kill

Disclaimer: anything you recognise isn't mine.

I wrote a good 10 pages. Hope you enjoy!

...

Chapter 3: Road Kill

'I like the sad eyes, bad guys, mouth full of white lies. Kiss me in the corridor, but quick to tell me goodbye.' Halsey - Ghost

19th November 1984

He'd asked if I needed a ride home as I dried off with his towel, mine was now bagged up in a plastic bag, still sopping wet. Of course, I had said yes to the ride, it was almost pitch-black outside and there was no way my legs were stable enough after what we'd done to walk the entire way home.

I had asked what he was doing at the school so late. There wasn't any basketball on so what other reason could there be? He replied with a casual 'had detention', which of course did not explain why he was in the boys' locker room. But, I supposed I was done questioning him. He was being nice for a change, and I didn't want to annoy him with too many questions. *Well, I thought, we've been intimate now, so why shouldn't he be nice to me?* I didn't realise how naïve I sounded at the time.

And so, here I sat in Hargrove's car that smelt strongly of cigarettes and faintly of what I assumed was sex. I looked to the backseat, thinking of how many girls he must've done it with on that sinfully smooth leather seating. I wondered if I would now become one of *those girls* and if this thing between us had been a one-time only event or if Hargrove wanted more from me. I could imagine my naked back against the seating, my hands digging into the cool leather or his hair or his shoulders, as pleasure ripped its way out of my lungs.

But this was Hargrove I was daydreaming about. He was not

boyfriend material at all. Not even friend material. And there was no way I was going to lose my virginity to him. It was bad enough with what happened earlier. I tried to tell myself that this was it, it would never happen again. It was a lapse in judgement, a stupid teenage lust fuelled mistake, my body too weak to resist his. I told myself to not be surprised when he acted like a dick and like nothing had ever happened the next time we saw each other.

"Something back there?" He had noticed me staring at the backseat. I cringed at being caught.

"No. I was just checking out your car." I held my breath as I hoped he believed my excuse.

"Really? Didn't know you were into cars." He glanced at me before returning his gaze to the road that he was speeding down. His tone of voice told me that he didn't believe me one bit, but I decided to continue to play along.

"There's lots you don't know." I said, inwardly cringing at how weird that sounded on my tongue.

"Like what?" He smirked, his interest sounding somewhat fake and mocking. It was as if he was making fun of the small-town girl. He probably thought that all I knew about was the countryside or cows or something stereotypical about us small-town types.

But I thought of all the things I knew about this small town where *nothing bad ever happened*. He had no clue what this town was really like, but neither had I until a month ago. I thought of the upside down, of demodogs, a bat with nails. Of Hawkins lab, of Eleven, of Barb. Of Steve's changing attitude, my parents that were scarcely ever home, of *Hannah*. My eyes glazed over as I thought of her.

I stayed silent, but Billy decided to carry on.

"Like how you like sucking boys off in the boys' locker room?" He said, smugly.

I sat there shocked, looking at the ash tray between us, my teeth grit together.

"Or how *you* like getting eaten out in boys' locker rooms? Or like how you're this weird loner chick, with no friends. You only have King Steve, right? I heard your mommy and daddy are never home. Does that bum you out?" He sniggered. "Poor little rich girl."

"Shut up!" For what felt like the hundredth time that evening, I felt fat tears well in my eyes. "You don't know shit, okay."

"I think I know why you were looking in the back seat." Hargrove sped the car faster, I held onto the sides of the car seat, fingers digging into the hard leather. I stared intently onto the road, it was complete blackness that was separated by his headlights. I was worried we would hit something or someone. He leaned over to me, using one rough hand to grab my chin and jerk it to face him. "I think you were day-dreaming about how many fucks I've had back there."

"Hargrove! The road!" I panicked as I tried to struggle out of his grip.

"I know you were thinking about you and me fucking back there." He smiled, roguishly.

"I wasn't!" I deny, trying to get his hand off me.

"Say it," He demanded, grip getting harder. "Say you were thinking about me fucking you back there!"

"No! I *wasn't*!"

He stomped his foot the gas.

"Say it!" He shouted.

"No!" I shouted back, tears streamed down my face. "Please, stop the car!"

"I will when you admit it." He growled.

I felt the car pick up speed. I thought about how he could run down a cat or a dog. Or collide with another car. Or hit a person. Or a child. Maybe even one of the boys on their bikes. I couldn't stomach the thought of that.

"Okay! Okay! I was thinking about fucking you!" I shouted, defeated.

"Fucking me where?" Hargrove raised his eyebrows, demanding and answer.

"In the backseat!" I conceded.

"Whooh!" He let out a burst of adrenaline from his lungs as he let go of my chin with a harsh push, sending me back against the chair. The car slowed some but was still going dangerously fast. I panted as I looked out the window, thanking God that he hadn't hit anything. My breathing was heavy. I have to get out. I can't spend another minute with him.

Fuck the dark, fuck the demodogs; I'm walking.

"Stop the car!" I cried.

"What, Princess?" The engine hummed underneath me.

"You heard me." I wiped at the tears on face furiously. "Stop. The damn. Car, Hargrove."

"I knew you wanted to fuck." He laughed.

"Why're you such a dick?" I asked, though I did not want an answer.

Hargrove just laughed. He didn't care about me and that seemed more obvious than it ever had before. That was why he was acting this way right now. In the showers earlier, it obviously wasn't the first time Hargrove had done something intimate like that with someone. Hargrove knew it was a first for me. He knew he was *the first* to do something like that with me. He knew, and he didn't care. It was probably best just to go back to hating each other.

Just then, I saw a small round shape on the road.

"Hargrove, there's something on the road!" I pointed to where the thing was. "Stop!"

Hargrove noticed it too, he slammed on the breaks. I held onto the car as we both jerked forward. A small white shape was lit up by the

headlights. It was completely still. I opened the car door, Hargrove did the same on his side. I stood shielded by the door as Hargrove took the first steps toward what could have been a small dog.

I thought of demodogs then. Of their terrifying flower shaped mouths full of razors for teeth. I thought about Bob, who I was told had been torn apart by them. I thought of Barb. I thought of how they could kill people, and even though Hargrove was a dickhead, I didn't want him to die – even if he did deserve it.

"Hargrove," I said, voice low with caution.

"What?"

"Be careful." I obviously couldn't tell him about the demodogs or anything else concerning the upside down.

Hargrove turned around then, and carried on walking. The figure still looked like an alien. It was a lump on the ground, covered in bright white light surrounded by darkness. It was almost like the head lights were a beam sent down from a space ship, like in E.T. or some other science fiction film that I had dragged Steve to go see with me.

He took a few steps forward, crouching as he got closer. I braced myself for something to happen. For the creature to snatch him up and eat him. But then Hargrove reached down and touched it. He started to smooth it.

"What is it?" I whispered, almost shocked that it hadn't eaten Hargrove. My curiosity caused me to walk over to where Hargrove was knelt.

"It's a dog." Hargrove said, he stopped smoothing it. I paused, exhaling as relief took over me now that I knew it wasn't something from the upside down.

As I walked over, I could see the fur clearly. It was facing with its back away from us, its hind legs stretched at an odd angle. I bent down to touch it, its fur wet in places. I moved out of the way of the headlights so that I could get a proper look at its legs. The fur would've been golden under natural lighting. I could see spots of

chestnut brown, I hoped it was mud, but due to the awkward angle of the legs and the copper smell in the air it was undoubtedly – and unfortunately – blood. The dog's tail was also lying flat and crooked on the cold pavement.

"I think it's dead." Hargrove said, standing up.

I reached out to smooth the dog's mid back, a small static shock prickling my finger. The fur was cold and matted. As I moved my hand over its coarse fur, I felt something beneath my hand start to move a little.

Then, breaking the oppressive silence, the dog seemed to come to life and gave a sudden pained whine. It carried on crying, making helpless sounds at the back of its throat. Hargrove made a shushing noise as he stroked behind its head.

"It's hurt so bad." I said. It was probably run over by some reckless driver – someone who drives like Hargrove. But this bastard driver didn't stop to see the damage, not like Billy, who was now comforting the dog.

"Where's the vets in this town?" Hargrove glanced up at me in question before returning his gaze to the poor animal.

"Across town." I said. "I'll direct you."

...

Hargrove had carried the dog to his open boot, laying her down delicately onto the black fabric. I thanked God or whoever was listening that the dog went without a struggle and that she fit in the boot easily. She couldn't be that much older than a puppy.

We'd driven across town, it took only 5 minutes with Hargrove's driving. But I could tell he drove slower than normal so that the dog was comfortable. I couldn't figure him out. One minute he was screaming at me, getting off on how gross he made me feel. Then the next minute he's smoothing and shushing a dog; being kind to someone, even if that someone was only a dog. You'd expect someone like Hargrove to take advantage of an animal's vulnerability – like he

does with people.

The only words that were said were by myself; *left, right, keep going this way, slow down*. Soon enough we arrived, I went inside to tell the staff what was going on. I held the door to the vets open as Hargrove carried the dog in.

Hargrove was told to place her onto the table in the surgery room, which he did swiftly. Two vets began looking over her while another vet asked us questions that we didn't really have the answers to. We told them that we had found her on the road, lying there and bleeding. And that we knew nothing else.

The vet asking us questions ushered us from the operating room before asking the final question.

"So, who's paying the bill?" She asked as she made a final note onto her clipboard before looking up to us.

Hargrove and I shared a single moment of looking at each other in utter confusion. Hargrove's wide blue eyes, almost gaping wide mouth and raised eyebrows would have been comical if not for the situation.

"Bill?" I questioned, eyebrows furrowed.

"Yeah, the bill." The woman in mint colored scrubs said in her rough voice. She was definitely a smoker, like someone else I knew. "Who's paying?"

"Oh. The bill." I'd completely forgotten about that. I think my parents pay health insurance, but I really don't suppose they have pet insurance. Why would they when we've never even had a pet goldfish? "I'll pay. How much?"

"Really?" She raised her eyebrows in a show of nonchalant disbelief. She looked at Hargrove like he was somehow the one that was supposed to pay.

I felt my resting bitch face take form as I said; "Yes, I'm paying."

"Um, okay." She looked at us with bug eyes. I could feel the

judgement coming off her in waves. Did she think this was some fancy dinner date where the guy pays after the food? "It'll be \$250."

Now it was my mouth and not Hargrove's that was gaping. There goes my savings for an Atari.

"Wait- hold on," Hargrove chimed in. "Look, miss, that's not even our dog."

'Miss'? I raised an eyebrow at his polite tone.

"Isn't there anything you could do for us?" he said, voice smooth yet still carrying a roughness that tickled like his stubble. The woman's full attention was on him and his coy smile. "I know I would *really* appreciate it."

He sounded like liquid honey. No wonder he already had a reputation with the girls in this town. But this grown woman wouldn't fall for it, I was sure of it.

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do." *Ha*, I knew Hargrove's flirting tactic wouldn't work! Time to get my credit card out. Wait... Why was I so happy about having to pay money? I should have cheered Hargrove on. Maybe I just didn't like the fact that he was openly flirting with another woman when only an hour ago he was on his knees for me.

"Are you sure?" He leant in closer, eyes focused on hers. "I really need you to help me out here."

"Well," I saw her eyes flicker down to his lips, a look of feminine power taking hold of her face. I wondered how old she was. Damn cougar. "Maybe I could take the price down a bit. All things considered. I mean, it's not like the dogs yours, right?"

"Atta girl." He touched her chin with the second knuckle of his index finger, brushing the skin for a second. I could practically see her knees start to tremble.

I looked back and forth between them and the flirtatious smiles that seemed etched onto their faces. I took a deep breath, this was going to be a long night.

20th November 1984

It was a bright cold day at Hawkin's high school, I pulled nervously at the polka dot scarf that hid the hickeys from last night. I stood at my locker, going through my books and textbooks, trying to focus on what I needed for next period.

If you'd have told me last week that a) Hargrove was a good haggler, I wouldn't have given a flying fuck. If you'd have told me that b) Hargrove and I would save a dog, I would've said it likely only needed saving *because* of Hargrove. And, if you'd have told me that c) Hargrove and I had the closest thing to sex without actually having sex, then I would have called you a lying sack of shit. Then, I would have punched you. In the face. Then, I would've gotten Steve to join in.

But I guess I may as well live in the upside down, because a, b and even c did happen. I do feel disgusting after what I did with Hargrove, but if we hadn't done what we did then maybe we would not have found that dog. Maybe she'd still be there suffering on the road. Or maybe she would be dead by now.

Hargrove ended up haggling the price down from \$250 to \$130, which was pretty impressive and quite entertaining to watch. The way that lady threw herself at him though, shamelessly flirting with someone clearly much younger than herself. It was gross to say the least. I kept telling myself that I wasn't jealous or mad at Hargrove for flirting with someone else, convinced that I would brainwash myself into believing it.

I found the book I was looking for, and put it in my bag. Just as I zipped up my backpack, my locker door slammed shut. My head sprung up to find the ever-smirking Billy Hargrove. His blue eyes looked down to my scarf before tugging at it slightly.

"Nice scarf." He touched the sensitive skin of my neck with rough fingertips.

"Thanks." I said gruffly as I slapped his hand away.

Just then, Betty and Gloria passed us to go their lockers which

unfortunately was almost directly across the hallway from us. They sent Hargrove and I smug looks. Fuck. Us being seen together would do nothing to help the rumours. *Neither would sucking Hargrove's dick*, I thought. I was obviously my own worst critic. Also, Hargrove was an asshole. He proved that by being a bully to Max, pushing Lucas against the wall, beating up Steve, etc. Maybe I should have thought about how much of an asshole Hargrove was before I let myself get carried away with the feel of his tongue last night.

Hargrove snapped his fingers in front my face, bringing me away from my thoughts.

"What?"

"I said, how do you think the doggy is?" He leant against the locker, hand on his thick leather belt.

"Did you just say 'doggy'?" I tilted my head slightly, a smile pulling at my lips.

"How's the *dog*?" Hargrove said, voice deepening in annoyance. My smile disappeared.

"How I am supposed to know?" I asked, not expecting an answer. "I was going to go visit her after school maybe."

"Her?" He queried.

"Yes." I say, nodding my head. "It's a girl."

"I thought it was a boy." He said.

"I've been thinking of it as a girl." I shrugged. "I don't know though. Could be a boy, could be girl. If it's a girl I win."

"Well, now. What if the dog's a boy?" He leaned in closer, licking his lips. "What do I win?"

"How about a kiss?" I said before my brain had a chance to keep up with my mouth. I can't believe I said that! What was I thinking? But the thought of kissing those lips made my mouth water. He hadn't kissed my mouth yesterday, he had only kissed the corner of it. I

wasn't sure if that counted as a kiss or not.

His eyes darkened.

"Deal." He licked his lips, draping himself against the lockers.

I cleared my throat, trying to regain my focus.

"I'll drive us there." He declared, leaving no room for argument. "We'll discuss more terms of the bet on the way up."

"...Sure." My voice came out in an embarrassing squeak. "What about Max though? Aren't you picking her up after school?"

"I'll drop her back at the house, then we'll go to the vets."

Just then, a particularly loud giggle bubbled over from where Betty and Gloria were stood by their lockers. They caught me looking at them, so I ducked my head. Hargrove followed where my eyes had been to find Betty and Gloria giggling into their hands.

"Worried about what they're going to say?" It was as if he had read my mind.

"No," I said. His smirk grew. "Yes." I conceded.

"Look, don't worry about it." He shrugged from his place against the lockers.

"Don't worry about it? Easy for you to say." My voice became bitchy in an instant. "You're Billy Hargrove! The new Keg King! What do you have to worry about?"

His looked almost betrayed as he stared me in the eyes. Then he gave a snigger as he shook his head in disbelief, as if saying; *'you don't know shit about me'*, before walking away. He trod down the hallway not caring about the people in his path, before turning left around the corner. All the while I stood next to my locker trying not to feel guilty for something I had no clue about, and wondering why he seemed so hurt.

"You alright?"

I turned around, caught by surprise twice in the space of five minutes. Only this time, the person who'd shocked me was someone *nice* and not *annoying*.

"Hi, Jonathan." I breathed in relief, glad that it was him.

"Hi." He said meekly.

"How's Will and your mom?" I asked. Jonathan's family was so broken. I kind of missed Joyce, she'd been kind of a second mom to me when I was younger. Jonathan and I were friends when we were 5 and 6 but after he had started Middle school we'd drifted.

The Byers' were good people, but them being good or not didn't stop the upside down from trashing up their lives so that it was even more crappy than before. I knew enough about Jonathan's asshole deadbeat dad. I thought of my own father then, and realised that having an absent father must have been better than an abusive one.

"Oh uh," He tried to smile at me, before his head bent down several times. Each time his head came back up he tried to look me in the eyes. "They're dealing, you know."

After a quick catch up, the bell rang obnoxiously reminding us of our next period. Jonathan had said he had his next class in A block whereas I was all the way over in C. I prepared to say goodbye, when he started talking again.

"I saw you with that new guy, Hargrove." I panicked. When had he seen us? Last night in the shower?

"What? When?" I spoke, trying to play it cool.

"Just then." He looked over to where Hargrove had walked, then back to me as if I were an idiot. "He looked... angry."

I let out a relieved breath, *he hadn't seen us in the showers*.

"That's how he always looks." I tried to joke, to bring some levity to the forever brooding Jonathan Byers.

"Just... I don't know... just be careful around him." His forehead

wrinkled. What he had said all at once shocked me, scared me and made me feel like I was cared for.

"Okay. You got it." I gave him a hesitant smile. "Thanks, Jonathan."

We said our goodbyes and headed off to class. I really did need to watch myself around Hargrove. Last night couldn't happen again. He was an animal in the car, shouting at me, grabbing my chin to force me to look at him. But then we found the dog and he was so *gentle* with her. One minute he was a brute, then the next he *kind*.

Why couldn't I figure him out?

...

Once school finished, I went and picked up my camera from my locker. If Billy and I were still going to the vets, then I'd take a picture of the dog and make lost posters.

While I walked toward the parking lot, I clusters of students and cars which hadn't left already. My eyes found blue, a blue Camaro. Hargrove's was parked in the middle of the lot and the orange sun shone off the blue metal. My eyes found his figure, lean and more muscled than the other boys at this school, and I looked away. I didn't want to go over there. I didn't want to talk to him. I didn't want my stomach to heat up whenever I saw him.

And so, I stopped, bit my lip, and took a calming breath. In, out. One... two... three. In, out.

My eyes surveyed the rest of the lot and found something I hadn't hoped I find again. It was the boys all stood with their bikes at the edge of the lot. Each of the gang wore wrinkled brows as they spoke discretely and pointed fingers at one another. I walked over to them, fingers wrapped tightly around the strap on my bag. If they needed help, I'd do it. Especially if they needed someone to help with something like what happened a few weeks ago with Will and the lab.

In, out.

I took my final steps, unnoticed by them and spoke.

"Hey, guys." They jumped when they saw me. "What's wrong? Looking for Steve?" Steve was probably half way to the grocery store – this week, it was his turn to get groceries.

"No-uh-um, we were-" Dustin said, startled, mouth flapping.

"We were electing a speaker to go talk to Bully." Lucas said. "Max asked us to go talk to him."

"Bully?" I asked, head tilted.

They all pointed with boyish fingers behind me to where another boy had draped himself against a blue Camaro with his leather clad back facing away from us.

"Oh, *Bully* as in *Billy*." I laughed a huff of air as I turned back around to face them. "Smart. Very punny of you."

"It was Lucas' idea." Will said with a small smile on his pale face. Mike rolled his eyes from behind him.

"Look," Said Mike as he brought his hand down in a chopping motion. "Max wasn't feeling well or something and she's been in the bathroom crying since lunch."

"Crying?" I asked, eyebrows drawing together.

"She wasn't crying!" Dustin said.

"Yes, she was." Mike shot back.

"She said she had something in her eye!" Dustin said.

"You believed her?" Mike crossed his arms.

"Yes!" Dustin waved his hands in the air.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked, trying not to get annoyed with the boys squabbling.

"We don't know." Will answered. "We were going to talk to Bully, but we were scared he might think one of us-"

"Lucas." Mike interrupted.

"-one of us might have done something to her." Will carried on.

"Are you sure you don't know what's wrong with her?" I asked, wondering what could make Max cry. She had always seemed tough. She'd been hanging out with a group of all boys, and skateboarded around, and was a tomboy in general. And the way she handled Hargrove the night of the fight was, well, bitchin'.

"She wouldn't tell us." Lucas said, head shaking as a frown pulled at his lips.

"What bathroom is she in?" I asked.

"The one by the gym." Dustin replied.

"Okay," I said. "Uh, I'll go talk to Hargrove if you guys want. And I'll check on Max."

"Thank you." Lucas said in an exasperated way as he let out a long sigh.

"Thanks, Clare Bear." Dustin sighed as he hugged me.

My shoulders raised to my chin as his arms wrapped around me. I patted his shoulder twice before I said; "Don't call me that."

Dustin stepped away, still smiling in gratitude. Will thanked me (but this one was quiet and sweet and wasn't weird like Dustin's), then Mike begrudgingly thanked me as well before I told them to go home before it got dark.

I turned to start my journey over to 'Bully' as the kids sped away on their bikes. I saw smoke drifting away from Hargrove. As I got closer, I could see that his shoulders were tense.

"Hargrove?" I called out.

His head spun to where I was, cigarette falling out of his mouth. He fumbled around, trying to catch the cigarette before it fell to the ground. It was unlike him to be clumsy. What was going on with the

Hargroves' today?

I walked around to his side of the car, and saw his cigarette was now in a puddle next to the car tire, sizzling at one end as wisps of smoke left it.

"Shit... my last one." He muttered to himself before looking up at me, his brow creased. "So, you still wanna visit the dog?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "But-"

"But we have to wait for my sister." He said. "I have no idea why she's taking so long. I'm gonna kick her ass when she comes out."

"About Max." I said before biting at my lip.

"What about her?" He said, eyes trained onto mine.

His were not the only eyes I could feel melting away at my flesh. Some heads had turned and watched as I got closer – or at least I thought they had – and I hoped Betty and Gloria had left school. I would hate to add fuel to rumour-fire.

"The boys... her friends told me that she's in the bathroom." I said. "And that she's been there since lunch. Crying."

He stepped away from the car, closer to me as a storm brewed in his eyes.

"Crying?" He said, head tilted upward. "What'd they do?"

"The boys? Nothing." I said.

"Why not tell me themselves then?" He said, stepping closer again, head jerking and shaking slightly as he talked. He seemed convinced that they'd done something to her.

I could smell his scent – cigarettes mixed with something distinctly *him*.

Breath. In, out. Don't panic.

"They were scared of you." I stepped forward. "Like a lot of people around here."

He blinked.

"I'm going to go help her. And find out what's wrong. Are you coming? You are her *brother*, after all."

Hargrove's anger seemed to peak then, but the only indication of this was the tensing of his jaw.

I turned and made quick steps to the bathroom. About 5 steps in, I heard Hargrove start to walk behind me, easily keeping up. But he didn't walk beside me; and the distance between us felt immense, and as vast as the ocean. It was probably best from now on to do just that - keep our distance.

...

Thanks for reading! Drop a review please :) reviews validate my existence lol

When writing this/watching the show I wasn't sure if the middle school and high school are on the same plot of land or not, (I'm not American but in this story they are.

John Horvath: Cool! I'm really glad you enjoyed the chapter! And thank you for reviewing!

Yourneonbunny: thank you! I'm so happy you love it!

Starlight-x-A-x: this review made my day! Thanks!

DelilahBunny: it's so cool that you think my characterisation is well thought out. I was beaming when I read your review! Thank you!

3CHOES: thank you so much! I'm so happy you're hooked! And I had intended for that whole dream/blood scene to be freaky. I'm kind of aiming for a Gothic Victorian genre vibe. Its good that you want to find out about her power lol. I think I might have given it away already...

4. Winged Things

Hey everyone! Got another 10 pages for you guys! There's not a lot of romance in this one, sorry. This chapter gets progressively more depressing, and is largely centred on Clare (especially at the end). Hope you enjoy!

Anything you recognise, probably not mine. Probably.

Chapter Four: Winged Things

"Beautiful things are fragile." Crimson Peak, 2015

20th November 1984

The heavy door creaked against its old hinges as Hargrove opened it. He gestured for me to go into the room, his arm still holding the door out for me. Pink and white tile met me as I stepped inside. Hargrove stayed in the doorway after I had entered and carried on holding it open like he was a human doorstop. The bathroom was eerily silent as if someone was holding their breath, trying not to make a sound.

"Max?" Hargrove said, all traces of anger gone now, replaced with something that sounded like worry.

"Billy?" Her voice was quiet and rough, probably tired from crying. She sounded vulnerable.

Hargrove and I shared a worried look. I was surprised to see him worried about Max. Hargrove was good at that; surprising me.

"Why're you in here, Max?" He spoke again, voice gentle – well, gentle for him – but it still had his rough quality. The combination of gravel and silk sent a shiver down my spine.

I walked to the stall at the end. Then I heard a small sniff. It sounded as though she was holding back sobs.

"Max? What's wrong, sweetie?" I say, reminding myself of what Joyce would have said to me when I was upset when I was younger.

"Who's that?" She sounded threatened, scared.

"It's Clare." I stood closer to the door.

"Clare?" She breathed out, sounding relieved. "Can you help me?"

"Yeah, sweetie," I glanced to Hargrove and saw him with his brows furrowed. I turned my gaze back to the stall. "What do you need?"

She paused for a short while, as if thinking through what she had to say.

"Can I only speak to Clare?" She asked. "Wait outside, Billy."

"Why?" He asked.

I sent him a look.

"Okay, okay, I'm gone." He said, hands held up in surrender, before shutting the door behind him.

"Is he gone?" She spoke with caution.

"Yeah." I spoke.

I heard fabric rustling before she finally unlocked the door. She cautiously walked out, not fully leaving the cramped stall. Her steps were measured and uncomfortable. Her face was red, as were her eyes from crying. Her hair was also messed up, strands of burnt gold sticking up and knotted in places. In short, Max looked as though she'd relived the night of the fight, but this time, the gate hadn't been closed and we hadn't won.

She took a deep thundering breath before mumbling something out, not meeting my gaze.

"What'd you say?"

"I said..." She looked around, trying desperately not to meet my gaze. "I-I'm bleeding."

Oh.

"Down there." She gritted out.

"Do you know why?"

"...No." She huffed. Her lower lip trembled, indicating that perhaps more tears were going to spring up.

Aww, I thought, no wonder she was in such a state. She had no idea of what was going on with her body. I wondered why her mother hadn't told her. And in a group of all male and all nerdy friends, I doubted the subject of female puberty ever came up.

...

I'd given her a brief explanation as to what a period was and why it was happening, and I'd also said the remainder of the conversation was probably best saved for her and her mom to have. She'd drank up the pieces of information I'd given her, yet I could tell she was still having trouble accepting it. I imagine that to her this situation seemed surreal. I was reminded of the almost surreal spotting I had had the other day after my strange dream. I still hadn't gotten my period, nor had I spotted since. But the strange dreams had carried on, repeating themselves in the darkest parts of my mind, haunting me when I was alone.

I'd searched in my bag for a sanitary towel, which I'd then given to her. I'd explained how to properly put it on her underwear, and she went back into the stall – her newfound comfort zone – with a determined expression on her freckled face.

"Wrap your hoodie around your waist." I advised while she was in the stall, cleaning up.

The blood had gone through to her jeans, only a little though, but she was still embarrassed. I don't blame her, I think I'd hide out in the toilets if I accidentally bled through my clothes in school.

She came out a few moments later, her face stone-like and uncomfortable as she stepped out. She had wrapped her green hoodie around her waist as I had said to do. Max spun around so that she could see her back in the mirror, checking to see if she her

appearance was safe to go outside.

Max sniffed then, lower lip beginning to tremble again. It was hard to see Max crack. I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her smaller frame. I felt her shake in my arms as I shushed her, trying to calm her down.

"It happens to everyone. Every *girl*, I mean." I said, consoling her – or at least trying to – as I wiped a single tear away with my left hand.

The door opened then, and an inpatient Hargrove began speaking.

"You girls done yet?" Hargrove started but then fell silent upon seeing us hugging. The blue in his eyes softened then into gently rolling waves.

"Ready, Max?" I asked, pulling back slightly to see her face. I wiped away another tear that had fallen onto her freckled cheek.

She nodded.

"Hey," I began. "You know what would be fun?"

"What?"

"Yesterday, me and your brother found an injured dog on the road. We took it to the vets." I looked to Hargrove to gage his reaction, but he was practically expressionless. "And we were going to go visit it today. Wanna come?"

Max seemed to perk up a little, before nodding.

...

We – Billy and I – were parked outside his house, waiting for Max, who was now changing her clothes and having a wash. Billy had told her to not be too long because he wanted to get back home by the time his dad finished work.

We'd gone to the shop on the way back. Hargrove had bought more cigarettes. Me and Max had gone to the feminine hygiene section, then to the sweet isle. The stuff me and Max had bought had been

taken in to the house with her.

"Why'd you invite her to come with us?" He said, almost accusingly as he broke the silence that I hadn't realised had been tense. Until now, of course.

I looked at him, eyebrows drawn together, my expression laced with confusion.

"To cheer her up." I shrugged as I shook my head lightly with disbelief. "Why else?"

He didn't reply and instead decided to ignore me before focusing on retrieving an item from his jacket pocket. *Asshole*, I thought as he pulled a compact white box out.

I turned my attention to the house, focusing on the peach door that Max had disappeared through about 10 minutes ago. I leant against the car door, wanting space between myself and Hargrove.

A few moments later, I heard the click of what sounded like a lighter. Then soon after a thick plume of white smoke caught the corner of my eye. My chest tightened. I turned and found Hargrove puffing on a cancer stick.

"Can you do that outside, please?" I complained as I waved my hand over my face, trying to waft the smoke away from me.

"Why?" He asked. *Why was he always so difficult?*

"Because its gross!" I say, only dimly caring about the fact that I sounded like a 7-year-old.

"Why're you always so difficult?" He asked gruffly, not expecting an answer.

I made a revolted sound in the back of my throat, trying to not get mad over the fact that I had just thought the same thing about him.

"You're such a princess, Princess." He smirked, knowing he'd annoy me.

"Takes one to know one!" I say, snatching the cigarette out of his mouth.

"Hey!" His voice got louder, deeper. He reached over as he tried to grab the lit cigarette back from my grasp.

We struggled over the cigarette for a moment. I made an effort to keep the cigarette away from his searching hand whilst rolling the window down.

"Give it back!" He said as he watched me hold the cigarette out the window.

"There's a puddle under the window, you know." I said, finally having the upper hand against Hargrove.

He rolled his eyes and slouched back against his seat. He looked like a toddler who hadn't got his way. Though, I supposed that was what I looked like too. I held his cigarette at ransom like a prized stolen toy.

I sighed as I brought it back over to him, being careful not bring the smoke or ash anywhere near my face or clothes.

"Sorry." I said, feeling almost sheepish. "But they *are* poisonous."

He took it off me, fingers brushing mine. His fingers were warm. He popped the cigarette into his mouth, ignoring me as he got out of the car, slammed the door and leant against the side of the car. I could see the smoke blowing over to the windshield. I rolled my window up so that it wouldn't come inside the car.

Well, at least he's not smoking next to me anymore.

I almost felt guilty with him stood out there in the cold. I could have just gotten out or opened the window when he started smoking. But at the same time, I was glad he'd back down. I felt as if I'd won a battle. And I needed to score points against Hargrove.

A few long and silence filled moments later, Max made an appearance with a fresh face and clean clothes. By this point, Hargrove had finished his cigarette. They climbed into the car, and we set off for the vets.

...

The woman from last night had led us to the kennels before she let us into a small room where the dog was sleeping on a small oval-shaped blue bed. I could see now that the dog was a golden retriever. It had been washed of the blood and dirt, and had been bandaged. It made me sad to see such a small dog with two casts wrapped around its hind legs. The vet woman let us know that it would take around 2-4 weeks for his legs to heal because he wasn't much older than a puppy.

Max's eyes lit up as she went and sat next to the dog, gently patting it in between its golden-brown ears. I went and sat next to Max on the ground and I began to smooth the silk-like fur. The dog's eyes opened sleepily, and it gave a huge yawn which Max smiled at.

"So," The vet said in her rasp of a voice. "You won't be taking him home for another two weeks."

"We weren't planning on taking him home." Hargrove said, moodily. "He's not our dog."

Which reminded me of another reason I was here; to take the dogs picture so that I could make lost posters. I started to look for my camera in my bag. Once it was found, I pulled it out and sat it on my lap.

"Well, it's your choice." She exclaimed. "No one's claimed the dog yet. We figure if no one does in the allotted time of two weeks, then either you can take him, or we'll give him to the pound."

Max's breath caught.

The woman left the room, telling us that we could have up to an hour in here with the dog before we had to leave.

Billy stood back against the door, looking proudly and smugly down at us.

"We can't let him go to the pound." Max said, firmly.

"We can't take him home with us either, Max." Billy responded just as

firmly, crossing his arms.

"But the pound is horrible, Billy." Her brows came together as her voice rose.

"Susan's allergic." He said. Susan? Did he call his mother by her first name?

"But-" She complained before being interrupted.

"*Max*, what do you want *me* to do about it?" Billy's voice got louder as he gestured to himself while speaking. The dog made a whine at the interruption to his slumber.

"Guys, I'm going to make lost posters." I said, hopefully stopping an argument. "So, hopefully, *if* the dog has an owner, they'll come forward. And if that doesn't happen, then I'll take her."

"Him." He said.

"What?" I asked.

"Him." He repeated himself simply, the triumphant tug at the corner of his lips annoying me and pulling me in at the same time. "The dog is a boy."

I'd almost forgotten the bet with Hargrove. I lost. I owed him a kiss now. But I was unsure of whether he'd want to collect it after the few little arguments we'd had.

"Looks like I won the bet, Princess." The smirk moulded onto his face with ease. This expression sent a jolt of heat to my lower stomach and I knew he'd expect payment soon. My mouth practically watered in anticipation as my eyes widened and cheeks grew hot.

"What's he talking about?" Max asked me quietly, as to not alert Billy of the question.

"Nothing." I said, looking at her. But she doesn't seem satisfied with my non-answer. "Don't worry about it."

She narrowed her eyes as she looked at both Billy and I. Then, her

attention was stolen by the dog for the rest of the hour. She only separated from the dog when I took the picture for the lost posters.

All the while, Billy stood behind us leant against the door. I could feel the heat of his blue pools burning into my back, never letting me forget that he was watching me.

...

"What are we going to name him?" Max asked as we were driving back.

"Max is a good name for a dog." Billy said jokingly. Max gave a short huff of a laugh, narrowing her eyes, shaking her head and sticking her middle finger up at him, making sure that he could see it in the rear-view mirror.

Billy gave a small smug chuckle.

"Are you guys always like this?" I question, head moving back and forth between them.

"Like what?" They say in unison.

I looked back and forth between them before I giggled. The rest of the ride was spent like that; Billy and Max getting into petty arguments and me trying to diffuse them. It was fun to watch the sharp-tongued and quick-witted Max talk back to Billy, a feat that most people in Steve's year couldn't brave.

Before I knew it, we were on the street that lead up my house, the orange sun starting to disappear behind the row of houses. I thanked Billy as he parked the car, and then I got out. Max climbed over to front seat, rolling the window down before Billy could drive away. I leant down to the open window.

"Max," I start. "How about you pick a name for the dog, huh?"

"Yeah, cool." She nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. "And uh, thank you. For earlier... in the bathroom. And letting me come see the dog."

"It's fine." I shrugged. "If you have any more problems, don't be afraid

to ask for help."

Max's eyes turned down for a second then, eyes lost in thought. Her blue eyes looked like they were drowning under the weight of the ocean. I could see that she held no illusion of hope that anyone could save her from her fate. She seemed to falter before Billy revved the engine, shocking her out her daydream.

"Bye, Clare." She said, quietly.

"See you later, Princess." Billy said over the growl of his engine.

Then the blue Camaro drove off, leaving me with thoughts of what had just happened. Why had Max all of sudden seemed so lost and full of hopelessness? Why was Billy so eager to leave? What is wrong with the Hargrove's?

I stared at the car as it drove over a hill and disappeared. The clouds over where they had driven swam together, refraining from letting the sky show any color except the looming grey that was present before storms. Though the storm had not begun yet, I could tell that it would last for quite some time.

...

Once I had gotten in, I left my bag next to the door and hung up my coat before walking to the kitchen. My belly had begun to rumble. Luckily, I was greeted by the sight of Steve putting frozen food in the oven.

"Hey, Clare." He called in greeting.

"Hi." I said back as I walk closer to him. I see that he put a pizza in to be cooked. "Oh! Pizza! We're going half and half, right?"

"Yeah, sure." He replied, turning the gas on as he nodded his head.

"Cool." I said, hopping up onto the counter. "Thanks for the food, Farrah Fawcett." I said as I flicked at his voluminous hair.

"Shut up." Steve's face deadpanned, his voice laced with playful annoyance. "And would you get down! I just cleaned the counter

tops."

"Okay, momma Steve." I laugh as he rolled his eyes at me.

I hopped down as Steve said; "Stop with the nicknames.... Clare bear."

My face scrunched up. Steve laughed at my twisted expression as he said something about karma being a bitch. Then I recovered from my inward cringe by giving him a light whack on the shoulder before I too laughed.

"Why're you home so late?" He asked, and I froze. "Did you have cheer practice again?"

"Uh," I thought about lying and saying that I had been at cheer, but I don't want to end up complicating things. My head was a mess right now. The Hargrove's, my bizarre bleeding, the dog, the bet with Billy and our impending kiss. A lie could only complicate things, right? It was best to stick to the truth.

"I found a dog that needed help." I told him the story. Of course, omitting any and all parts that featured Billy in them. Half-truths were better than lies. Leaving Billy out of the story would work.

"Poor dog." Steve said. His honied brown eyes – the same color and shade as mine – shone with empathy. Steve had really grown up in the last year, as had I.

"How was cheerleading yesterday, anyway?" Steve began after a moment, changing the subject. I wondered for a second whether this was his way of getting my mind off the dog. He knew I was quick to cry.

"I think I might quit. How's basketball?" I asked before he could question me about quitting.

Steve looked down, forehead wrinkled. "The same. Hargrove's still a dickhead."

"Oh, I know." I said, knowingly as I agreed with him before my mind could catch up.

"How'd you know?" He questioned. I could see his protective cogs turning behind his eyes. "Has he been harassing you?"

"No." I said just a tad quickly. "We're lab partners."

"Oh." He put his hands on his hips. "Yeah, well, that sucks."

"Yep." *Poor choice of words Steve*, I thought as I recalled mine and Billy's time in the shower. We had, indeed, sucked. I shook my head slightly, trying to wake myself up from that memory. My cheeks went hot, but thankfully I don't think Steve noticed my discomfort.

"If he does anything though," He said as he pointed his index finger out.

"Yeah. I know, Steve. I'll come to you if anything happens." I tried not to sound exasperated as I lied. I hoped I was getting better at lying – it was something that recently I was becoming quite familiar with. Especially in conversations concerning Hargrove.

"Mom and dad called." Steve said after grabbing cutlery for us to set to the table.

"What'd they say?" I asked, eyebrows raised. We hadn't heard from them in at least a month. The last time they called, they'd said they would be home in time for Christmas, to which Steve had compared to the little knowledge he had of propaganda during World War I that had said that soldiers would be 'home in time for Christmas'. But our parents were not soldiers. They were barely even parents. Sure, dad provided with his fancy job and mom gave birth to us, but... it wasn't the same as having a loving mother and father who you knew and were confident in the fact that they loved you as much as you did them.

"They're back for the 1st of January." Steve said little dejectedly as he set his knife and fork down on the table.

I felt my eyes burn, knowing that this hurt Steve more than he let show.

"Steve," I said softly before grabbing his hand. "We'll have a great Christmas, with or without them. Okay?"

He played at trying to look confused at my empathy. Like he was trying to suggest that I hadn't heard the note of sadness in his voice. But I knew he felt it. I knew he felt the crushing force of not feeling good enough. Of not being good enough for your own parents. We both knew the feeling well.

But then, his false expression broke, his eyes glazing over. He squeezed my hand back before speaking again.

"Yeah." He smiled softly. "It'll be a good one."

The egg timer went off then, alerting us that our pizza was done cooking. My stomach growled in response. Steve went out to dish the food and pour drinks while I stood alone by the dining table.

This gave me time to think of my parents.

Dad was aloof at best. He was a cold and calculating man. Mom was, well, it felt as though she still held a grudge against us for giving her stretch marks. They were never hateful to us though, they just weren't the types of parents a kid need. I am thankful to them though. Not just for clothes, money and roof over my head (though I am really grateful for those things), but I'm grateful for the valuable life lesson in how *not* to raise children. One day, if I ever have a kid of my own, I'll learn from their mistakes. It's not that the mistakes were numerable, (they'd have to actually be around us to make multiple mistakes) it was that they kept making the same ones over and over: they were hardly home, they expected too much from Steve, mom treated us as friends rather than kids, whereas dad treated us as *offspring*.

If I had children that would never happen. They'd have loving parents. Me and... *No*. I did not just think about... about Hargrove and me... having kids? My forehead creased, and my breath got caught in my throat, creating this stubborn lump that wouldn't budge. My mind wandered off with wild thoughts and just for a one crazed second, I pictured a baby with my hair color and Billy's beautiful ocean eyes. I could feel my heart beat going wild, my ribs struggling to keep it from beating out of my chest.

I was suddenly struck with a sense of longing. A longing to hold

something of my own; something that was truly precious, and to have it love me back.

...

9th December 1981

"This is awesome!" Hannah exclaimed while examining my record player, whilst also nodding her head to Bowie. We were in my room testing out a present from Steve. Golden light streamed into the room and made her skin glow.

"So, Steve just gave this to you?" She asked, glancing back at me.

"Pretty much." I nodded.

"That's *awesome*." She said. "I wish I had older siblings to give me free stuff."

"Older siblings aren't all that great." I shrug. "Steve's more annoying than anything."

"If he's so annoying, then why'd he give you this sweet record player?" She raised her eyebrows at me from her position on my window seat. "He seems cool."

"He only gave it to me because mom and dad said they got him a better one for Christmas." I say, leaning back against the frame of my bed.

She laughed at my expression before telling me I sounded like a brat. *Takes one to know one*, I thought. Then she got up from the window seat, a serious expression marred her normally smiling face.

"Girl-Talk now, please." She demanded, voice firm but expression weary as she sat next to me on my bed. She took a breath before starting; "You know Dave?"

"What about him?" My voice became impish and full of mirth as a coy smile took a hold of my face.

Dave Reid was someone she had been crushing on for a while now.

She loved to tell me things about him, like what he was wearing that day, or how his hair looked or if he smiled at her. The stories about his smiles were always the best. I loved hearing those ones the most because of the dopey look on her olive toned face. The way her smile lit up as she told her animated tale about how he'd given her a smile from across the cafeteria always made me happy. Hannah was such a hopeless romantic.

"Do you think he'll ask me to the Snow Ball?" She asked.

"I hope so." I said, reassuringly. "Why? Has anything happened? Did he talk to you again?"

"He kissed me after school behind the gym, three times, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but I was freaking out. Can you believe it?" She said in one breath.

"You kissed?" I sat forward on the bed, mouth wide with shock. They'd kissed? *Three times?*

"Yep." She said, dreamily as her head bobbed up and down.

"Holy shit!" I exclaim. "Traitor! You're supposed to tell me when stuff like this happens!"

"I'm telling you now, idiot." She poked my arm.

"I meant straight away, you dolt." I said as I poked her back.

We started a little poke battle before she used a pillow to shield herself.

"Will he ask me then, do you think?" She asked, eyes wide as if she were waiting to hear a message from God. Girl-Talk was just as sacred in her eyes, I guess.

"Well, I should hope so." I said as I nodded. "Three kisses? He'll *definitely* ask."

She smiled in response and it lit the room. Her smiles were like an achievement, making me feel as though her expression was a prize I'd worked hard for. She thanked me as if I were a fortune teller that had

prophesised a great and romantic future, before hugging me. When she separated from me she went back to the window seat and looked out of the glass panes. She was probably watching a bird.

She loved the idea of birds. Of being able to fly away whenever you wanted to. She loved the idea of utter escapism presented by those winged creatures.

We can be heroes... we can be heroes just for one day... The song finished. It was replaced with a bird's song. But then that finished too. The bird flew away, just as Hannah wished she could.

...

Hope you guys enjoyed it!

Thank you to everyone who has either reviewed/favourited/followed. It really means a lot.

John Horvath: that was a great review – it gave me a lot to think about, especially the "husband material" bit. Thank you!

3CHOES: I loved your review. And you're spot on about Billy and Clare. Thanks for reviewing!

Starlight-x-A-x: Yeah, Billy said 'doggy' 🐶 I thought that would make him cuter than he already is lol. Thanks for reviewing!

Margaux: thank you so much for your review. It's good to know that people are enjoying this. I'm enjoying writing it too.

Hold on, don't go yet! I got a question:

So would everyone prefer longer chapters = longer wait OR chapters around this size = wait of about 9 days?

5. Butterfly Bruises

If you've seen *Pretty in Pink*, then one of the scenes might sound familiar to you. I was inspired by one of the scenes from that film.

Have fun reading this chapter!

Chapter Five: Butterfly Bruises

*'I've heard allegations 'bout your reputation
I'll show you my shadows if you show yours'*

Cat Pierce, You Belong to Me

21 November 1984

That morning I awoke to a pounding headache. I sat up in bed, the skin of my face feeling rough and stale from where my tears had tracked down my face.

I dreamt of moths eating butterflies. I dreamt the same dream about a grey dusty figure again. I dreamt of Hannah. I thought the nightmares about her had stopped, but I guess they'd started up again. They'd probably stick around forever. My eyes stung as I recalled my dream.

Hannah had been just as I remembered her. She wasn't pale anymore. She was olive toned and beautiful.

Then she'd left me. She drifted out of my room, and I sat on my bed powerless to stop her. I had followed her out as soon I was able to move. I found that my hallway was dark and misshapen with small particles gently rolling in the air. It reminded me of the upside down.

I had been led by some invisible being, pulled along by persuasive hands, down the damp hallway, to the stars, then to the basement. The pipes there had quivered and groaned as they leaked. But what had leaked out wasn't water. It was some kind of red liquid that I stubbornly didn't want to name as blood. It would freak me out too much to identify it as such.

In the middle of the floor sat a chest. It was bigger than my music box, yet smaller than a tool box. It sat there, the black wood tempting me. It had my initials *C.H.* carved into it, so it must be mine. My fingers ached to smooth over the cold wood. I felt myself gravitate toward it, being pulled in like gravity. Like a moth to the flame. I could nearly touch it. Nearly feel it. My fingertips flirted with it.

Then my alarm clock went off.

As I rolled over in bed to quiet my clock, my nose picked up an unfortunately familiar scent; copper. I didn't want to see it. I knew it was there. I could feel the wetness. My brown eyes stared morbidly down at the blood that stained my sheets and my nightgown.

It had happened again.

...

I cleaned up. And the same as last time, the bleeding had stopped. I wasn't on my period.

That morning, before school, I made a doctor's appointment to find out what was going on with my body.

...

The blackened developing room was stuffy, and the red light shone down onto me, warming my skin. The dark room had a certain charm to it. It was the place where photos came to be. It currently housed myself and Jonathan. I'd asked if he could help me out with developing the picture of the dog. I'd forgotten how to properly develop it since I hadn't done it in years. I also didn't want to mess up the picture in any way so asking Jonathan to help was a must.

"So, it's simple really," He said as he flatly laid the paper onto the surface of the solution. "It has to be covered in the solution..." He trailed off, happy to be talking about a passion of his.

What he said next caught me off-guard.

"Will told me something last night." I looked at him, his foreboding expression dimly lit by red lighting. "He said Max had been crying.

And – since she's Hargrove's sister – I thought it maybe had something to do with him. And Will told me you were going to speak to her. Was she okay?"

"Max was fine." I shrug. "It didn't have anything to do with Hargrove though, I swear."

"And you say that because you think you know him, right?" He questioned.

"I don't *know* him. But I've spent time with him." I said, almost too defensively. "Look, what happened with Max yesterday didn't have anything to do with her brother."

He paused a moment, moving the tray as to cover the paper with the solution. The walls of the room seemed to arch in on me now.

"So, you've spent time with him?" He asks, looking down at his work.

"Yes." I reply, nodding my head once and leaving it facing the floor.

It seems as though whole minutes pass in the tense atmosphere. I fear that Jonathan is disappointed or vexed. I felt like I'd made an admission of guilt, and I was now being made to feel shameful in the silence of these four oppressive walls

"Look," He begins. "I know what feeling lonely is like. And after... after Hannah, I know you felt completely isolated. But Hargrove is not the type to be friends with." Jonathan struggled to get the words out, like he was admitting a hard truth. "I know we're not friends anymore and it's not exactly my business but... he reminds me of my dad. And I don't want to see you hurt because you thought he was someone he isn't."

"Jonathan," I said, buying time while I grasped for words to respond to him with. My eyes sting with tears that I will not let fall. "I did feel... isolated after Hannah – and I still do sometimes. But I don't know, there's just... something I can't help... can't describe... I feel as if maybe Billy feels that same loneliness too. I see it in on his face sometimes. The loneliness that we're both so familiar with. And I can't help but want to... to *fix* something."

Jonathan gave me a long-pained look. As if we were connected by our separate yet similar sorrows. He broke the link and looked down to the white sheet, eyebrows drawn together, though I knew his face was tense from our discussion rather than his work on the photograph.

"I still don't trust him. Or like him." He said, quietly.

"Don't tell Steve about any of this." I ask. "Or Nancy."

"Why not?" He said as he used large tweezers to pull the picture from the tray. He turned the sheet over.

"I just- if Steve ever finds out- you know what Steve and Hargrove are both like. Steve will overreact. And Hargrove..." I contemplate, darkly. "Well, you saw what Steve's face looked after their fight."

"Why do you like him then?" He accused, expression laced with slight disgust.

"I never said I liked him." I replied, to which Jonathan gave me a look. When had he gotten so good at reading people? He'd probably gotten it from Joyce.

"I don't know." I said as I shrug. Why do I like him? He's narcissistic, arrogant, aggressive. He's an ass to Max and me and practically everyone else in school.

But he's also gentle in his own way. He was kind to the dog, which I'll stubbornly admit still made my stomach do loops. And despite his behaviour in the car after our shower, during said shower he was actually kind of sweet. My scalp tingled as I recalled him washing shampoo from my hair.

"If he does anything," Jonathan began, his voice becoming stronger.

"I'll tell someone." I firmly say, looking him in the eye. "I promise. Anything bad happens and I won't keep it to myself, okay?"

He gave a nod, though I could see he wasn't that convinced.

"Picture should be done by now." He said as he pulled the picture up

from the solution with his large tweezers. He then hung it up onto the drying line. The dog stared back at us.

Jonathan scowled before saying; "I know it's a regular dog but in this lighting, it looks like a..."

"A demodog." I said, completely agreeing with him.

It seems that try as we might there's no escaping memories of the past.

...

Me and Taylor - a casual friend of mine – were in gym class located at the back of the gym, tying our shoes, trying to look as though we were busy doing something. That way we were less likely to be picked on by Coach Belle – though most girls simply referred to her as *the Beast*.

"So, what's the deal?" Taylor asked as she began tying her loose afro up into pigtails. "You doin' anything next weekend?"

I didn't know Taylor that much, but I'd gathered that she was a party girl – the opposite of myself. But we got on well enough. The last time I'd really spoken to Taylor had been at the Halloween party, where I'd spoken to Hargrove for the first time. I couldn't decide whether I regretted going to that party or not.

"I'm probably going to just stay at home." I reply.

"Why?" She smiled a teasing smile. "You gonna study again?"

"Probably." I admit. "Why? Is that bad?"

"You just study so much. You study *too* much." She laughed a little bit. "I worry about you. And I just don't see the point in studying so much."

"I just don't want to rely on my parents my whole life, you know?" I tell her.

"Yeah?" She raises an eyebrow. "What are you gonna do? Be a

doctor?"

I shrug. Who knows what I could be?

"Look, Clare," She starts. "I just don't want you to waste away studying. All that *focusing* and *thinking* can't be easy on a gal's looks. I mean, just look at half the teachers in our school."

I laugh. Taylor was easy to be around. Easier than Hargrove, at least. But I suppose he wasn't tough to beat in that respect.

"You see, there's this party..." She slyly begins.

"Oh, so that's why you're teasing me about how much I study." I say, knowingly as I roll my eyes.

"Tina's throwing it again." She smiles. "C'mon you had fun at her Halloween bash, right?"

I did have fun, that was true. But like always, I'd drifted off to be by myself. Then Hargrove had shown up, trying to charm me. It was the first of many confusing and infuriating encounters with him.

I shook my head at her, an apologetic smile taking form as I prepared to say no.

"Well now, don't be so quick to say no." She says, her cunning grey eyes narrowing. "I heard the new guy's gonna be there. I also heard the Halloween party was where you and Romeo first met, right?"

I froze. How did she know? Who am I kidding, she probably found out through the rumour mill. It's not like the rumours actually carried any weight though. What had happened between us was a one-time thing.

But then, a sickening thought occurred. Hargrove and Tommy H were friends – or at least they hung out together – so what if Hargrove had told him about the shower we'd had in the boys' locker room? It wouldn't shock me if the ever braggadocios and arrogant Billy Hargrove had bragged to Tommy H about it.

But, a small self-conscious part of me thought, was it even worthy to

brag about in the first-place? I hadn't ever done stuff with boys before, and I doubt beginners luck swayed how good or bad I was at it. Had they laughed behind my back at how inexperienced I was? My heart stung as I thought about Billy's potential betrayal.

And once Tommy H knew, he'd probably tell Carol, then she'd tell Betty and Gloria who'd then run their abnormally large mouths to the rest of the school. It would only be a matter of time before Steve heard these rumours. I inwardly grimaced.

I suppose I just had to take solace in the fact that I didn't have anything solid to suggest that Billy had told anyone. It was probably just rumours of Betty and Gloria's making. *Probably.*

"Who told you-" I began to ask but was interrupted by the loud blow of a whistle. The Beast was here.

Taylor groaned as we got up and walked to the middle of the sports hall. In the middle stood a gathering of girls from the cheer squad, their eyes lingering over me as I got closer. I tried not to focus on the glances they gave me with their upturned noses. I tried and failed to ignore snide sniggers from Betty and Gloria.

They don't bother me, I tried to convince myself. The rumours shouldn't bother me. Why should they? It's not like me and Billy were together. I couldn't help the crushing feel in my chest when admitting that to myself.

It doesn't bother me.

It doesn't bother me.

It doesn't bother me...

...

After gym class, it was time for science. I sat at mine and Billy's desk, tracing the scrapes and bumps of wood pattern on the cheap desk, patiently waiting for his arrival. Soon all the students had taken their seats.

Still no Billy.

I could practically see him stroll in, steps confident as his body came closer to mine. But this didn't happen.

I waited. But he never came.

...

We were supposed to have a double period of science, but since he wasn't in, I had to work alone and do his work for him. I kept notes, did part of the experiment alone, and made two sets of regular notes and homework notes – one for him, one for me.

I had devised a plan to walk to his house and give him the homework that had been set, and to scold him for not being there.

Hargrove had driven me to his house the other day when we were with Max, but with the speed at which he drove, I had struggled to catch a glimpse of any of the sign posts. So, I'd gotten his address from Nancy, who'd gotten it from Mike, who'd gotten it from Lucas, who had gotten it from Max.

I would've asked Steve for a ride there, but he was dropping the kids to the Wheeler's for DnD (whatever that was), and I really didn't really want Steve to know that I'd gone to Hargrove's house. Also, I didn't want another fight to break out between the two if they crossed paths. Steve's face was only just healing up from the night of the fight. And I just knew Steve would be all protective and not let me go, even if I told him it was just lab stuff. Steve and I are practically the same age though – only 18 months apart – so I could do what I wanted.

I carried on down the street, only a few houses away now. The sun was still up, though it was slowly going down. I quickened my steps. I doubt Hargrove would offer me a lift again, so I'd have to race against the sunset before darkness came over Hawkins. Otherwise, I'd be walking in the dark which made my heart lurch in my chest and my throat tighten when I thought about doing so.

I looked at the sign post, then glanced down at my hand to where Nancy had written the address in her small tidy scrawl. Nancy and I were never close, not even when she dated Steve. I never really liked

them together. I was still kind of mad at her for borderline cheating on him with Jonathan Byers and fucking with Steve's feelings, but at the same time I'm glad they're not together. I almost feel guilty because I knew Steve was hurting, but I knew they would have never worked out anyway.

But Nancy and I had something in common; the losses of our best friends. Barb was taken from her, stolen away into the darkness, but Hannah had chosen to go. It was her choice to leave her life behind for whatever waited on the other side. Whether that be heaven or eternal darkness. I hoped she was in heaven, smiling down at me with her joyful love-filled grin.

I looked at the houses as I passed. This wasn't that bad of a neighbourhood. The houses were normal sized, I guess. Though, growing up, 'normal size' had been my house yet many of Steve's friends had considered the place humongous.

Only a few more houses to go.

The more I think about it, Hargrove did miss quite a bit of school. It wasn't enough so that the teachers really took notice, but it was enough to brand him as the type who just plain didn't give a fuck about attendance. He'd have a day off every now and again, and looking back now, I realised that most of the time he'd return with bruises. But they weren't always on his face. Steve had told me that he'd had bruises on his stomach and ribs at basketball practice. Most of the school thought it was because he was in a gang. Another *brilliant* and *credible* tale likely cooked up by Gloria and Betty.

Knowing Hargrove – even as little as I did – I could tell that he was not part of a gang. The bruises probably came from fights, yes, but that's because he's an arrogant provocateur. Maybe he bruises easily. Maybe he does a lot of physical activities outside of just basketball. Maybe he's exceedingly clumsy. Or maybe he really is in a gang – or part of some underground fight club? *Nahh*. That's too farfetched. As I came up with more ridiculous theories about the origins of his bruises, I couldn't help but wonder about how he really had gotten them.

I remembered then about the haunted look in Max's eyes when I told

her to come to me if she needed help with anything. A sense of dread bugged me as I took steps closer toward Hargrove's house. Did I ask the wrong sibling if they needed help?

Finally, after walking down the street of identical houses, I found the right number. I checked my hand again just to make sure. It was the right number. I hadn't really gotten a good look at it the other day, but this was it. The house looked small and unimportant, a carbon copy of all the other houses that were neatly lined up. This was not the type of house I expected him to live in. I expected something larger – like mine – to go with Hargrove's large ego and take-no-prisoners attitude. But this was nice.

After a short walk up the path, I found myself at the door. What if he wasn't here? I mentally face palmed. I should have just waited until the next time I saw him in school. *No, I've come all this way, I thought, just knock.*

I raised my hand to the cream door, knocked three times. Then I waited.

Nothing happened. No one came.

I knocked again, this time only two knocks, but they were louder than the first few.

I waited again. I went onto my tip toes so that could see through the topaz colored glass panels on the door. I could see dark orange shapes through the glass but none of them were moving. The stillness of the house again made me think of how Hargrove was the complete opposite. He was bursting with brashness, he was loud and cocky. He was a violent storm; a hurricane. This house was silent, a deafening calm that set my teeth on edge. I was used to quiet though. My house had this same quiet loneliness, even when my parents were home.

Billy wasn't here.

I'm almost glad that no one else was. It would have been awkward explaining that I have a science project with Hargrove to either his mom or dad. I wonder what they were like. Were they ashamed of Hargrove's behaviour? Or, were they just like him? Bullies. That

would explain where he'd gotten it from. Max seemed nice though, so maybe Billy was the only annoying one.

I turned to go back down the path, and start the long journey home. Just as I was half way down the path, I heard a door handle turn followed by the swing of a door. I turned around to see Hargrove stood there, beer in hand.

"Hargrove." I said, shocked.

"What're you doing here?" He asked as he leant against the door frame.

My mouth hung open as I took in the thin fabric of his white tank top. I could see that the top was wet with sweat and clinging onto the slick tanned skin of his muscular chest. His arms were also tanned, looking supple as silk in the evening sun. I licked my lips.

Then I saw the fresh bruises on his face.

"Well?" His gritted out. He'd probably caught me staring at him. Something told me he wouldn't mind being checked out, he'd be honoured even, but me seeing the bruises? Something told me he didn't like me seeing those.

Where had he gotten them from?

"You missed school." I said dumbly.

"That doesn't explain why you're here." He said, agitated.

"Uh," I blinked. "I – I made notes for you. They're from today in science because we're partners... I made notes on the homework too so that you'll be prepared for next lesson. And I got the picture of the dog developed."

I hurriedly searched in my bag for my note pad. Once it was found I struggled to get it out. It was caught on something. *Great.* I felt my cheeks grow pink from embarrassment as I felt the weight of Billy's eyes on me. I could feel his annoyance rolling off from him in dark waves.

As I grabbed the corner the book, my skin was caught. A gasp escaped me as a sharp and sudden pain came over me. I wrenched my hand out of the bag. There was blood dripping from my ring finger. The crimson liquid was rapidly spreading, tickling my skin as it went down my wrist.

I hadn't noticed Hargrove striding over to me. I was too busy trying to pull my sleeve down so the blood wouldn't stain it. Hargrove shocked me by grabbing a hold of my left wrist. He looked down to the blood, inspecting the wound. I tried to ignore the buzzing sensation where our flesh met.

He pulled me along to the door of his house. Once we were inside he released my wrist and shut the door. It smelt heavily of sweat, cigarettes and alcohol. The scent I had come to know as Billy Hargrove's own brand of cologne.

He nodded his head to the left before walking to where he had gestured to. I followed promptly after him, my finger now lightly throbbing as blood continued to flow out steadily from the cut.

He led me to the kitchen. It had a round off-white table with a matching set of four chairs with the same off-white paint finish. There were off-white counters lined up against the wall with matching cabinets above them. The cooker was also an off-white color. So were the walls. And the floor. And the ceiling. It was like someone had laid a sheet of days old snow onto the room and had managed to cover every inch with the same plain color. The only break from the shade of white was the dusky orange flame of the evening sun coming through the glass of the window.

He told me to wash the blood off under the tap. Whilst I did so, Hargrove went to the table pulling out two chairs so that they were facing each other. I watched as the blood ran down the sink, the water played with the thin strings of red before running into the sink hole. Hargrove gave me a white tea towel to dry off with. I feared getting blood on it, so I dabbed it lightly onto the skin surrounding the cut.

"Sit." He told me. I did as I was told and went and sat in the dining chair.

He's being nice. I felt my guard go up. He's been nice before, only to change into a complete asshole afterward.

He began searching in one of the cabinets and produced a green bag with the words 'first aid' on it along with a small white cross symbol. I felt a warmth in my chest, pleasant surprise grew there.

He sat in front me, putting the bag onto the table whilst getting a bottle of hydrogen peroxide out along with cotton balls, bandages and bandage tape.

He soaked a cotton ball with the hydrogen peroxide. He then took my hand in his. His hand could easily cover my own. I took note of how his fingers were also thick as they brush over my smaller, more delicate ones with the cotton wool. He left tingles up and down my flesh as he traced my hand which sent shivers quaking down my spine and turned my insides to liquid.

Hargrove, in that moment, was the most delicate I'd ever seen him. I looked to his face, his eyelids appeared shut from this angle making him look harmless and angelic. But being this close to him, I could see the light swelling on his right brow. The explosion of purple and pink on his face was shocking up close. It was a spotted pattern of burst blood vessels that was shaped like a single butterfly wing. I was quickly learning that he could be as delicate as any winged creature but as fierce and dangerous as any monster from the upside down.

My breath caught when he looked up and met my gaze before returning to his work.

He cleaned my hand expertly, no doubt from having to clean out wounds of his own many times before. He smoothed the cotton over the cut, treating my skin like the most delicate silk. I felt that familiar warmth spread deep in my belly. His breath washed over me, the scent of cigarettes on his breath grounding me. I couldn't be attracted to him. He was too mean spirited, he had too many vices, he was a heart breaker, he was out of my league.

Now that he had cleaned the blood away, I saw that my ring finger was cut from the tip to the second knuckle. It was a long fine strip, almost as if it were a super-sized papercut.

As he examined his work, I noticed the difference in our skin tones. His was a sun kissed Cali tone that told of days spent shirtless in the sun, surfing to impress the girls. Mine was that of a pale Hawkins girl, one who'd never really seen the sun for longer than a week at a time when her parents would take her and her brother on business trips disguised as holidays only to leave them at the pool with an expensive nanny.

He began to wrap the bandage around my ring finger, callous fingertips flirted with my skin. His flesh was warm against my own. He expertly finished wrapping the bandage, then placed three thin pieces of white tape on horizontally to bind it.

"There," He met my eyes. Our faces were only inches apart. I could feel his warm breath continue to wash over me, caress me. "All done, Princess."

Even though he'd said he was done, he still held onto my hand.

"Uh – thank you." I said as I breathed in his toxic scent. I leaned a fraction backwards, forehead slightly creased. "Why do you call me 'Princess'?"

He smirked softly. I raised my eyebrows in question.

"Why do you call me Hargrove?" He asked.

"Well, I guess because it's your last name maybe." I said, incredulously. "It's a bit obvious."

He chuckled, and tried to go for a wide smile but then flinched slightly at the pain from moving his face.

I inched closer without noticing. My uninjured hand rose slowly. My fingertips made their way to his square jaw, flirting with the stubble there. Then when it drifted delicately up to his cheekbone, his eyes closed. His skin was hot under my palm. He seemed calm but by now I knew that there was always a fire burning in him. It had flickered and burnt people in the past but now it only tingled softly against my palm. He went still. Motionless. He breathed in deeply.

Our faces nearly touched. Our breathes mingled together. Our skin

burnt. Our eyes closed.

Footsteps broke the smooth silence.

Someone trod into the kitchen.

Billy sprung away from me.

We turned and stood to face who had interrupted our solace.

...

Gasp! Who came in? I wonder... mwahaha!

Sorry to leave you guys with a cliff-hanger but I gotta do what I gotta do to keep you interested.

Hope you all liked this one! Drop a review (even if you didn't enjoy it - I like constructive criticism).

Ladey Jezzabella: thanks so much! This review made my day ☺

John Horvath: you were spot on when you wrote; 'Clare seems to be mourning Hannah in the way Nancy mourns Barb'. It's what I intended so I'm happy someone picked up on that. Thank you for reviewing.

DelilahBunny: thanks for the PM. I kind of wanted the Hannah situation to be vague and ambiguous, especially at first. So, I'm glad you were confused, as evil as that sounds lol. Thanks for reviewing!

Guest: thank you!

CupcakeCobra: wow! Thanks for all the reviews. Its good to know you're enjoying this fic.

6. Blue Lies, Colder Eyes

Hi everyone! Sorry for any mistakes. I'm so thankful for all the reviews, favourites and follows!

Anything that looks familiar, isn't mine.

Enjoy!

Chapter 6: Blue Lies, Colder Eyes

'You're the only one who knows my demons.' - Jaymes Young, *Naked*

21st November 1984

He seemed calm but by now I knew that there was always a fire burning in him. It had flickered and burnt people in the past but now it only tingled softly against my palm. He went still. Motionless. He breathed in deeply.

Our faces nearly touched. Our breathes mingled together. Our skin burnt. Our eyes closed.

Footsteps broke the smooth silence.

Someone trod into the kitchen.

Billy sprung away from me.

We turned and stood to face who had interrupted our solace

It was an older man stood stolidly, with a moustache and Billy's blue eyes. But this man's eyes were cold and barren, lacking the light that Hargrove's held. This must be his father. I stood up next to Billy – I mean *Hargrove* – as his father looked at both of us. His eyes held something deep and dangerous within them. His shoulders were tense. He put me on edge. The room suddenly felt degrees warmer which only added to how uncomfortable I was becoming.

I mentally prepared myself for the awkwardness that was about to come. Mr Hargrove had just caught me and his son in what looked

like a compromising position. It didn't just look like one, it *was* one. What the hell was I thinking getting that close to Hargrove again?

"Who might you be?" He asked curtly before his eyes turned briefly toward me before they returned to Hargrove.

"I'm his lab partner." I smiled. "I brought some notes over for Billy. And I brought homework."

"Oh." He looked at me again. His expression was evened out – almost lacking any emotion at all. But I caught something in his eyes that seemed off. "How nice to meet you. Your name?"

"She's Clare." Hargrove interrupted me. Gone was his tranquil expression, it was replaced with the mix of anger and annoyance which so often marred his face. There was something else too, he tried to hide it, but I could see the sliver of fear in his eyes flickering under his ocean eyes. "And she was just about to leave."

Rude, I thought, as I picked up my bag from where I had set it down next to the chair and pulled it onto my shoulder.

"Um, yeah. I was just leaving." I said as I glanced at Hargrove. "Thanks for bandaging my finger."

Hargrove ignored me, he still faced his father looking on edge.

"What happened to her hand, boy?" Mr Hargrove's voice was low and authoritative.

"Oh," I held up my hand to show him, shrugging. "It was nothing. There was something sharp in my bag and–"

"It was an accident." Hargrove cut me off, his voice tight. "...Sir." He added after a moment. I'd never called my dad 'sir' before.

Mr Hargrove nodded twice. Silence took over.

"Well," I took a step forward. "I'll just be going then."

"Nonsense." Mr Hargrove was still smiling a tight smile as he held his hands out. I could tell that he was faking being nice. "My boy never

brings girls around. My wife, Susan, will be home any minute now. She said she was going grocery shopping after her shift at work. I'm sure she would be delighted to cook dinner for you."

"Are you sure? I don't want to impose." I really meant that I didn't want Steve to worry about where I was when I didn't come home for dinner, nor did I really want to spend an awkward evening with Hargrove and his dad.

"Nonsense." Mr Hargrove said again in his faint yet demanding voice. "Stay for a while."

Billy looked at me, eyes bleeding a look of trepidation that seemed to be confused about whether it was pleading for me to stay or leave.

"Okay. That would be nice, thank you." I smiled at Mr Hargrove. "But could I use your phone to call someone please? Otherwise they'll wonder where I am for dinner."

"Of course." He nodded.

...

I called Steve from their living room, Hargrove and his dad were still in the kitchen, talking quietly. I had lied to Steve, telling him that I'd forgotten to tell him that I was having dinner at a friend's house.

"Are you picking up Max?" I asked, before physically cringing. Steve would think that was a weird question. I could have just asked if he was picking 'the kids' up, not just 'Max'.

"Max?" I could almost see how confused his face was through his incredulous tone of voice. "Uh, no I'm- I'm staying in tonight. Dustin's mom said she would pick him and Lucas up. Will's got Jonathan to get him. And Max's asshole brother's probably picking her up. Why?"

I paused for a second. "Only because Hargrove wasn't in today." Good save, I mentally patted myself on the back. "But he'll probably come get her I expect."

"If he doesn't, the Wheeler's will probably drop her again."

"Good." I nodded, twirling the phone wire around my finger. "So, I'll be back around 6:30. Maybe a bit later."

"Okay. See you."

"Bye." I hung up.

I made slow and pensive steps to the kitchen. Earlier, when I was close to Hargrove – to Billy – it now seemed like ages ago but in reality, it was only about 10 minutes ago, he had been so calm. It's hard to believe that the boy – no, man – who had held my hand delicately, whose eye I had touched in equal gentleness, had been Hargrove. It was so unlike him. I'd never seen him without his guard up. He was always brash and violent and reckless, never quiet, still, or peaceful.

My hand could still feel the ghost of his stubble, the callouses of his fingertips flirting with mine. It made my breath catch and made a tingling warmth deep in my stomach grow. His hands, that had caused so many people, so much pain had done something good, even if their only good deed had been to bandage rather than bruise. It was something. It told me that there was more to Billy, more to him that was hiding behind his cigarettes, smirk and dangerous attitude.

I made it to just behind the kitchen door way. I was hidden in shadow as I heard them speak.

"Where's Max?" Mr Hargrove's voice growled.

"You gave her permission to go to the Wheelers house for dinner, remember?" Billy responded, voice laced with his snarky attitude.

Mr Hargrove stalked over to Billy, invading his space as he grabbed Billy by the collar of his tank top, until their faces were about an inch away. Mr Hargrove looked monstrous now as he looked at Billy. Billy flinched, but only slightly.

"Don't make me beat you with that whore of yours in the house." He growled.

I took a step backward. He would *beat* Billy. Is that why he had

bruises on him? Oh, God. What about Max? Did he beat her too? I tried to think rationally for a moment. Maybe he wouldn't beat him, maybe it was just a threat. But, the pieces had already fallen into place. Billy's behaviour was a learned one, one learned from his bully of a father. That's why he was so violent, so aggressive. That's why he was obsessed with always being dominant – because he was never in any position of power at home.

"Is Max with that coloured boy?" He almost hissed. I thought of Lucas then. What would happen if her father ever saw her and Lucas together? I imagine it would go down similarly to when Steve and Billy fought at the Wheeler's house. But this time, there'd be no syringe to stop her monstrous father.

"I don't know." Billy shrugged.

"She better not be, for your sake." He was practically nonchalant in his threats.

"How am I supposed to control who she-"

"After dinner," Mr Hargrove interrupted, gripping Billy's shoulders tighter, somehow getting closer to him. "You are going to bring Max back and take that whore of yours home. Do you understand?"

"Yes... sir."

Mr Hargrove raised his eyebrows, wanting Billy to continue.

"I understand." Billy conceded, his voice almost giving way to a whimper.

Neil moved away from him, fiddling with his fingers as if stretching them, preparing them for hitting something. I heard the distinct clicks of each of his knuckles. I thought I saw Billy flinch with every crack.

Having had enough of this, I walked out of the shadows as if I hadn't heard anything.

"I'm sorry, Mr Hargrove, I can't stay for dinner. I forgot that it's my-aunt's birthday so my folks are having a small dinner party for

her. They need me to be there." I surprised myself with that gem of a lie. I just hoped he believed me.

"What a shame." He said, sounding disappointed but I knew it was false.

"Billy, could you drop me home please? And on the way back you could pick up Max?" I gazed at Hargrove, eyes wide hoping he would say yes.

"That sounds fine." His father answered for him.

"I'll go get changed. Wait by the car." He said before grabbing my hand and pulling me out of the kitchen.

I nearly said, 'nice meeting you, Mr Hargrove' to keep up my pretence of politeness but I couldn't stomach it. Not after figuring out where Hargrove's bruises came from. They couldn't possibly come from his dad, could they?

I strode out to Hargrove's shiny blue car, looking through the window to the backseat. It reminded me of the argument we had. It reminded me of Hargrove's temper. I knew now where he got that from.

I grimaced as I turned away from the car, looking to Hargrove's house where the front room light was being clicked on. The sky was now dim, a dark grey taking over it, turning the world black and white. The orange light shining from the window was the only real source of light left. It reminded me of the fire Steve, the kids and I had lit in the upside down. It was the only light in a cancerous sea of darkness. My head looked back and forth down the street. I was safe, I told myself, the creepy girl had closed the gate. I was fine. I was safe, and nothing was going to happen to me.

I couldn't say the same of Hargrove who had yet to come out of the house. I hoped everything was fine, but at the same time there was no doubt in my mind that his father was bullying him again. I stomped forward, intending to go inside the house to stop his father before anything else happened.

As I got to the door, it was swung open by Hargrove. He had changed

into his biker boots, his regular well-fitting blue jeans, a white shirt that barely had any buttons done up and his leather jacket. I was momentarily distracted by his chest that glistened in what limited light there was.

"I thought I told you to wait by the car." He said, sounding annoyed and slightly aggressive while he closed the door behind him. As he reached behind him to close it his shirt opened out more. I couldn't help but stare at the new spread of skin that his shirt had uncovered.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

"I wondered why you were taking so long." I said, worried as my eyes sought out his.

"I wasn't that long." He shrugged and grabbed my wrist, pulling me back toward his car. His hair was fuller than it had been before, and he smelt of some cologne that barely masked cigarettes and sweat, but he still smelt delicious. He'd done more than just change his clothes. That was why he had been as long as he had.

He released my wrist when we made it to the Camaro. He strolled around to his side, unlocked the doors, then climbed in. I sat down in the leather seating, the cold material making me shiver. The car was freezing inside, it was cold enough to see my breath. Billy started the car, warming the engine, then leant forward to wipe the condensation off the windscreen. It'll probably snow soon. I wondered if Billy had ever seen snow before. I knew he was from California, and I don't think they ever had snow there.

"It'll snow soon, I bet. Have you ever seen snow before?" I asked, breaking the slightly uncomfortable silence.

"No." He started to drive then, pulling out of the driveway. "Uh... My mom told me it snowed in the early sixties, when she was about our age. But it hasn't snowed since."

"What's Susan like – your mom, I mean?" I couldn't help but question myself over whether she was as bad as his father.

"Susan is not my mom. She's Max's." His voice was steel as his hand

tightened around the steering wheel. "Not mine."

"Oh." I simply said as I looked down at my hands. I was fiddling with the edge of my bandage. "Did she divorce your dad?"

He didn't reply. He just took one long deep breath as he leaned back in his seat, the car carried on speeding down the road, taking us further and further away from his asshole father. I backed off immediately from asking questions. Billy was being nicer than normal, and I fucked it up by asking a personal question.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked-"

"She died." He interrupted.

I was taken aback for a few long moments. His mom – obviously someone he had cared for deeply – had died, leaving a scared boy with a hole that was only made worse by his horrid father. In just one hour, I had learnt so many personal things about him – things that had shaped him into who he was.

"Sorry." I said. The part of his face that I could see looked neutral, yet I could recognise that he was nursing a scar that hadn't fully healed. I thought of Hannah and the scars she'd left on me.

"Don't be." He stared out the windscreen. "It wasn't *your* fault." The way he said it made it appear as though there was some foul play in his mother's death. Whose fault was it then? His father? No, his father was vile, but he couldn't get away with murder. Could he?

"...uh, Hargrove?" I needed to change the subject.

"What, Princess?" He caught my eyes, blue melting into my brown.

"I may have... lied." As I spoke he made a confused expression.

"About what?" He got a cocky smile, and I saw the slimy cogs turn in his head. "You're not a virgin?"

Subject: changed.

My cheeks almost immediately began to heat up, the blood rising to

the surface as my body's attempt to cool myself but that wouldn't work when I was around Billy. He always had a way of getting my blood hot and pumping.

"Shut up!" I told him off before I poked his shoulder.

"Hey!" He laughed. "No poking the driver!"

"I'll poke whoever I want to poke, whenever I want to poke them!" We exchanged glances, both processing how stupid that statement sounded before we both burst into laughter. We laughed until we ran out of breath, our chortles making the shake Camaro slightly. Billy had to regain his wits so that we didn't crash but he was still smiling as he returned his focus to the road. I sat back for a moment, realising that this was the first genuinely amused laugh that I had heard coming from his plump lips. A small tear ran out of the corner of my eye, reminding me of the tears I had shed in the locker room when we'd done stuff to each other. A shiver ran through me as I thought of it.

"So," Billy still had a small smile he was trying to hold back when he asked; "You *are* a virgin, right?"

I rolled my eyes and poked him again, this time in a different spot on his ribs, causing him to wince. I'd probably hit a bruise.

"Sorry." I said for the third time in what must have been about 5 minutes.

"Don't be," He murmured. *It's not your fault*, is the part he left unsaid.

"I lied about needing to go back to my house." I admitted, as I looked out at the darkening sky. "I don't even have an aunt."

It was a long moment before he spoke again. The smile from just then seemed to vanish completely. It was replaced with a stiff look, one that masked all emotions other than anger. It reminded me of how his father had looked at him when I was in the kitchen. I knew he was asking himself why I had to lie. I knew that he was wondering whether I had seen his father threaten him. I could sense that he knew that I had seen at least some of what happened in the plain

white walls of his kitchen.

All humour had abandoned us now and was replaced by the air thickening with trepidation.

"Why'd you lie?" He murmured with a voice low as his father's.

"I s-saw you..." I stuttered out.

"And my dad." He finished it for me.

"Yes." I answered. My eyes focused on the tightening of his hands on the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white.

"How much did you see?" He carried on in his low growl of a voice.

"Not much." I admitted. His jaw was locked, tightening further as he gritted his teeth.

"I saw him grab you." I carried on, watching him carefully. "And threaten you."

He laughed. I felt my eyes grow wide. He was laughing for some twisted reason.

"So, the Princess saves the bad guy, huh?" He sniggered, but his hands were still wrapped tightly around his steering wheel. "You thought you'd try to help me out by getting me away from him. Sorry to burst your bubble, but I live there. There's no escaping *my old man*."

"Why don't you stay over my house?" My mind couldn't stop the words from leaving my mouth. "Max could come too, I'm sure."

"He doesn't touch Max." There it was. I didn't need any more proof than I already did to come to the conclusion that Billy was beaten by his own father. Regularly, maybe. My stomach turned. At least Max was somewhat safe from what Billy had said.

"You can still come over if you want." I said, shrugging.

"What would King Steve say?" He shook his head lightly, smirk

tugging at his lips. "There's no way in hell he'd let you and me have a friendly little sleepover. It's not like we'd be painting each other's nails."

"I won't tell Steve about it." I shrug. "And no, we won't be painting each other's nails."

"What will we be doing then?" He grinned wolfishly at me, sending a shiver down my spine to where heat gathered in my lower stomach.

"Sleeping." I curtly said, returning my gaze to the outside. Fences and houses, telephone poles and trees whizzed past us. Or rather, *we* whizzed past *them*.

"It'll be fun;" He chuckled slightly. "climbing up the Princess's tower."

I blushed again and let out a small huff of a laugh. He really needed to stop making me blush. Either that or I needed to train myself to stop.

"Well, we've got time before I have to pick up Max, so why don't we go get something to eat?"

He had given me a hungry look as he said '*eat*'. I licked my lips.

"Sure." I said, calmly. I felt my heart beat. How had I been so cool and damn near nonchalant when replying to him? Inside I was panicking about what this meant. I seriously had no idea about where we stood with each other. One moment we hated one another, the next we were doing intimate things in a boys' locker room, then we were back to hating each other. Now though, we're almost becoming – and I'm afraid to say it, like if I think or say it aloud it'll be true, or worse it won't be – *friends*.

...

Billy and I were stood inside Melvald's General Store and like any self-respecting teenagers, we were stood in the sweet section. Billy had picked up red sugar-coated strawberry laces and sandwiches from the other isle (I had picked up sandwiches too, ham and cheese). I was still deciding on what sweets to go with. I was torn between jaw breakers, rainbow strips and gummy bears.

"I'm gonna go get something else while you're choosing." He touched my lower back as I turned to face him. "Meet you back at the car?"

"Okay," I smiled sweetly. "I won't be long."

I stared up at the fat packs of candy as he walked away. This isle was always my favourite – yes, because of the candy, but it was also because the colours were so vast and bright. They were like an Andy Warhol piece.

I settled on the gummy bears, then headed to the drinks isle where I picked up a Sprite. Pulling my credit card out of my pocket, I made my way over to pay. On the way there I was distracted by the fridge freezer full of ice cream. I suddenly had a craving for it. The Magnum ice cream practically called to me. It was weird, yes, but I'd always liked ice cream in the winter, despite how cold the weather and ice cream both were.

I opened the freezer, pulled out an ice cream and added it to the pile of junk in my arms.

I went over to the tills and saw that only two were working. One of the cashiers was Joyce, who I hadn't seen since the upside down drama. I thought about Bob then – her boyfriend that had been torn to pieces by those nightmarish things. Me from five years ago would've asked; 'How could such a horrible thing happen to such a good person?' but I had now learnt that horrible things happen to good people all the time. Dreadful things just happen regardless of whether good people, like Joyce, deserve them. *Deserve* has got nothing to do with it.

I walked forward to her till, happy yet apprehensive to see her.

"Hiya, Clare!" She smiled.

"Hi!" I said as I put my stuff on the till.

She eyed the ice cream I was about to pay for.

"You still eat ice cream when it's this *cold* out?" She laughed, shaking her head slightly. "I remember when you and Jonathan – you must have been about 5 and Jonathan about 6 – you both ate a whole tub

each of Ben and Jerry's and you both ended up puking your guts out after."

We both laughed at that. She became so animated as she told the tale about me and Jonathan ruining her rug with half-digested ice cream, but then she'd told me that it had been a wedding present from her great aunt and that she always thought the carpet was the ugliest thing she'd ever laid eyes on.

I'd missed Joyce. It was nice to see her happy. The last time I'd seen her she'd been beside herself with grief over Bob and worried over Will. The smile that lit her face gave me hope that she was doing better.

"I didn't think you'd be working this late." I said as I looked out to the dark sky behind the glass doors. I caught my reflection beside Joyce's in the window and realised that we were about the same height. I could remember looking up at her as a kid so now being the same height as her was kinda weird.

"Well, it keeps me busy." She shrugged, before scanning the Sprite bottle. "Keeps my mind off things."

"Yeah, I understand." I nod. "What about Will and Jonathan?"

"Oh, Will's at Mike's house." She informed me as she scanned the last items. "Jonathan's there too." Her eyes widened as she leaned closer, almost whispering now. "He's with Nancy."

I sniggered as I handed her a 20-dollar bill. *Jonathan and Nancy, sittin' in a tree...*

As the cash register pinged open, something serious took over Joyce's eyes, like she remembered that there was something important to tell me.

"Didn't I see you come in here with that boy?" She looked sceptical as her eyes narrowed.

I froze. *Play it cool, Clare.*

"Who? Billy?" I shrugged. I hadn't noticed the pitch of my voice

rising. "We're partners."

She gave me a look.

"*Lab* partners," I added too awkwardly and perhaps a little too quickly and probably much too loudly for it be considered the truth. The expression of warning and disapproval hadn't left her face. I could only describe this kind of worry as the motherly kind. I couldn't blame her for her worry though, she'd seen the state her house had been after the fight – shards of broken plates and glass covered a lot of her kitchen floor – and she'd seen the state of Steve's face after brushing with Billy's knuckles. She'd also seen Hopper wake Billy up and give him a shake down. She knew his face and she had seen us together.

"Just be careful." She looked stern. "I remember the boys that were like him when I was your age. I married one of them."

I looked down as my face started to heat up. I tried to focus solely on the items, silently bagging them as she sorted out the change. Once we'd finished our respective tasks, she handed me the money back, which I put in my jeans pocket.

"Look, Joyce," I started, pitch rising again. "*Nothing's* going on between us. It's like I said; '*lab partners*'. And he's not bad, he's just..."

I couldn't finish. She had given me an all-knowing look before brushing the middle knuckle of her pointer finger on my lower cheek. There was something altogether motherly in that touch – something that I had lacked from my own mother. It made me feel bad for lying to someone so kind.

If only Billy had someone like Joyce in his life. I knew that if she found out about the abuse, she'd protect him from his father. She'd tell Hopper. Then maybe Billy wouldn't have to deal with his dad ever again.

"I know when you're lying, sweetie." She smiled, sadly. "Just promise to *be safe*."

I nodded, feeling sheepish for being caught out in the lie.

"I promise." I said.

...

My review goal is 30 reviews. If Pewdiepie can reach 60 mill subs, we can get 30 reviews, right?

...Right?

John Horvath: I'm British so I completely forgot to include thanksgiving, sorry! I was gonna try to add it in but to this chapter, but it would mean editing *sooo* much of what I've already written and I'm just too lazy for that... but thanks for reviewing, you always have such thoughtful things to say/comment, so thanks!

Ladey Jezzabella: Thank you so much! I'm glad you think Billy is in character! And I'm happy you're intrigued so far. Thanks for the review!

CupcakeCobra: Thanks!

gUest: great review, it gave me a lot to think about regarding their relationship. Thank you!

Solstice7777: your review made me smile, thanks! And yeah, Billy is an asshole, but I think most people – even assholes – have a soft side. I like to think that Clare brings out Billy's soft side... Thank you for the review!

You guys give such thoughtful reviews, thank you *so* much.

(I might PM when someone reviews from now on, just to save some time...)

7. The Park

Yay! Review goal accomplished! Thank you all so much for reviewing this, favouriting and following this story! It means so much!

I feel like it's been a bit of a slow start, with the main focus on the romance plot (which is one of three plots going on in this story which I am trying to juggle), but pretty soon the other two plotlines are going to start getting meatier. I'm so excited!

I absolutely love the quote I found for this chapter. I think that especially the last line of it heavily links to the upside down which is quite cool.

Anything you recognise, is not mine.

Hope you enjoy! 5941 words coming your way!

P.S. I would have updated sooner but wouldn't let me log in :(

Chapter Seven: The Park

"They take their heat from the sun and when it deserts them, they die."

"That's sad."

*"No, it's not sad, Edith. It's **nature**. It's a savage world with things dying or... **eating each other right beneath our feet.**"*

- *Crimson Peak, 2015*

21st November 1984

"I know when you're lying, sweetie." She smiled, sadly. "Just promise to *be safe*."

I nodded, feeling sheepish for being caught out in the lie.

"I promise." I said.

...

I got back into Billy's car, my body welcomed by the warmth it provided. I looked over to where he was slouching back against his seat, his left hand resting on the wheel as the other played with his lighter. He turned his head to me as I sat down, his cool guy face turned up to the max. He'd also put his shades on while he was waiting for me.

I tried to stifle a giggle as I took in the sight. Sunglasses? When the sun had gone down? Was he joking? Or high?

"Do they were sunglasses at night in California too or is that just a Billy Hargrove thing?" I said as a smile tugged at the corners of my lips.

His head tilted to the side. He taken aback by my question. His forehead began to crease ever so slightly.

"No." He huffed, like a dejected and stroppy kid. "Put your stuff on the backseat."

Why was he so frustrating? I had asked a simple – and somewhat comedic – question, and now he was seconds away from his anger exploding. I was already stressed about Joyce knowing that there was something going on between us. Which was yet another thing to worry about. I was starting to regret my time with Billy today. But I suppose that was the nature of our relationship so far; we do something, and I regret it soon after.

But there was a silver lining in this mess; I could help Billy. Not that Billy would want to be saved from an abusive father by a 'Princess', but I could at least try to help. I would let Billy sleepover to escape rough nights, hard fists and overpowered fights at his own house. I could just be a friend to him; a distraction from the evils in his life. I couldn't really truly understand my need to help him. It was true that Billy had done more harm than good to me. But, like I had said to Jonathan, there was a nagging pull that I couldn't understand nor make quiet, which was making me want to help him.

I did as I was told, turning around to put my bag next to his when I

heard plastic hit the dashboard. I glanced at him and saw that the sunglasses were gone from his face. I smirked as I put my bag next to his on the backseat. My bag leant onto his causing it to sort of slump over. The items inside came out half way. My eyes widened at what I saw.

Joyce had said to *'be safe'*. Had she seen what I was looking at? Had that been how she'd figured out about our thing? I felt blood rapidly flood into my cheeks, the skin there becoming hot and red.

The thin cardboard of the box was shining in the dim light a streetlight gave off.

Billy must have seen what I was looking at in his rear-view mirror. I sat back in my chair, trying to make my eyes go anywhere but his.

"What cashier served you?" I asked, thinking that if Joyce had served him she would definitely think that we were- were having sex.

"Why does it matter?" He shrugged and shook his head in arrogant confusion.

Why? Joyce could tell Jonathan about the item he bought, who would maybe tell Nancy. And there was a chance that Nancy would tell Steve. The thought of four people – plus the girls from cheerleading – knowing about us was mortifying. The girls from cheer practice, I could handle. I could even handle Jonathan and Nancy knowing. It seemed like Joyce already knew, which made my insides recoil into themselves. The disappointment I felt coming off her in waves in the store now made even more sense to me. She definitely knew. *Or thought she knew; there isn't anything between me and Hargrove*, I thought stubbornly.

But Steve... Steve knowing was different, dangerous even. He would obviously share Joyce's disappointment, but he would also confront Billy about it. I knew he would. And nothing good would come from that confrontation. Both would end up beaten and bloody. Steve's cuts from the last fight were still healing, a orange-brown had replaced the deep purple bruises from before.

"It matters because you bought *condoms*." I said as if it was the most

obvious thing in the world. "It matters because whoever saw us together in that shop is going to add two and two together and-"

"And what, Princess?" He raised his eyebrows as he cut me off.
"Figure out that we're not just lab partners?"

"This isn't a joke, Billy." I said, tone serious. "You know who works in that store?"

Billy put the keys in the ignition and started the car. I could tell he wanted the engine to tune my voice out, but I wasn't finished.

"Joyce Byers." I said with emphasis. "You know, the woman whose house you fought Steve in?"

"So, what?" He began to drive.

"So, she could tell her son, who could tell his girlfriend." My voice sounds nervous as my lower lip trembled just slightly. I'd already told Jonathan not to tell anyone that I was friendly with Billy, but if he found out that there was potentially more than friendship then maybe he'd tell Nancy. "Do you know who his girlfriend is?"

He shrugged and rolled his eyes.

"Nancy Wheeler." I grit out, mad at his nonchalance. "Steve's ex. If she tells Steve-"

"Well, we wouldn't want King Steve finding out, would we?" He interrupted with a smirk, mocking my fears.

I rolled my eyes, unimpressed by his nonchalant attitude. Why was he always like this?

"I just don't want everyone thinking that there's something going on between us," I spoke. "When there *clearly* isn't."

"Clearly." He repeated, smirk disappearing. I thought – for not even a full second – that I saw a sliver of pain in his eyes, but it was quickly hidden by something that looked like malice.

I sat back against the seat and shook my head as he fiddled with the

radio, one hand on the wheel and the other pushing buttons. Music sprung out of the speakers so loud that I could feel each chord strung in the car.

"Why'd you buy them anyway?" I ask, somewhat naïvely, my voice loud as it tried to compete with some metal band. "We're going to the park."

He just looked over to me and gave me that roguish smirk that I was becoming all too familiar with.

I can't wait for the nights with you, I imagine the things we'll do, the song played. I tried so hard to ignore it, but I couldn't help but curse the universe for the timing of my question, his lusty smirk and those lyrics.

I turned my face away from his, cheeks red with anger and not – *not* – because he's so mouth wateringly attractive – what am I saying? He's *not* attractive. He's an ass. An arrogant asshole, one who loves to taunt me with his sun kissed chest and killer smile and blue Cali ocean eyes and skilled, rough hands and –

"Look," His speech cut off my inner musings. I wondered for a second of fright if he'd heard the things that I'd thought. But then he continued, as arrogant as ever. "There are other girls who, *unlike you*, put out."

I scoffed. He smirked. The song played. The engine roared.

"You're a fucking pig." I ironed out, face tight.

"Isn't that what you called me before I went down on you?" He said, smugly. "And then you went down on me. It was... *good* but it was *clearly* your first time."

"Clearly?" I scoffed, repeating him and only vaguely aware that we had already repeated this word just a moment ago.

"*Clearly.*" A devilish smirk slid onto his face as easy as rain slid down my window. His eyes were fixed on the road but from the power-hungry gleam found in the blue waves of his eyes, I knew he wasn't focused on what was ahead. He was instead fixated on the small

battle he'd won against me.

The song ended and another one began. All the while I sat there stewing in silence, arms crossed as I looked fixatedly out of the window, hopeful for a distraction. But I didn't find one, at least not a distraction that was all that entertaining. I watched white dots that were littered against a midnight blue canvas move steadily over us. I watched the treetops – only visible because they hid the stars – move past us.

I didn't see Billy glance at me with arrogant eyes. I didn't see the arrogance melt into something else; something gentle and filled with what some would call longing.

Eventually we made it to the park.

...

As a child, I remember long bright summer days spent at the park. This was the place where I'd come and play with Jonathan or Steve or Hannah when I was kid. There were other children there, of course, and we all knew each other. It is a small town, after all.

Most of the children spent their time within the black bars of the fence surrounding the park, but I would venture outside to the surrounding land.

The park was on a plot of wide open grasslands that stretched out to be the size of two football fields. In the middle of this expanse of land, there sat one lone oak tree. Its branches reached upward toward a cloudless sky and gifted shade from golden beams of sunlight. I'd spent many days under that tree in my childhood which was probably the reason for how pale I was - and still am.

But the shade was not the only thing that attracted me there. The main cause for my time and attention were the butterflies. Like me, they would also take refuge in the cool space provided by the aged tree.

One day, there was one cocoon hanging above me on a single branch. I jumped up to it, wanting to hold it within my palm. I jumped, and I

reached, and I stretched, wanting to touch it. But I was far too short and couldn't quite reach the cocoon.

My attention turned to the ground, where a lone blue butterfly lay still. Lifeless.

The color of its wings was a beautiful shade of cerulean blue and the small black dots that lay atop the blue reminded me of the dusting of light brown freckles across my cheeks. I knelt next to it, grass tickling the bare skin of my shins and arms as I reach out to touch it. It was cold and weightless against my small palm. I stroked its feather soft wings, wondering how it was possible for something so small to exist.

Then, a small tingle went through my palm. The butterfly's legs had tickled the skin there, causing the tingling sensation. It hadn't been dead after all. My tiny round eyes widened as it started to move. It crawled up my palm to the edge of my sleeve before its tiny wings fluttered, then it flew away, past the cocoon and over the park. It flew until its small blue form was no longer visible.

But now, roughly nine years later, I sat in Billy's parked car and stared at the park that was shrouded in darkness. The park had been left to rot and was in a considerable state of disrepair; the swing set missing a few seats, the see-saw rotted in the middle, the pirate ship climbing frame cracked and graffitied. A few years back there had been a newer park built, one closer to the preschool which was probably where kids played these days. That park had been made with metal frames, leaving no possibility of it rotting as quickly as wood.

It was horrible to see a place from my childhood in such a state. It was as if this place had been stolen and only the memories remained the same, but even they would eventually become tainted. Sooner or later my brain would replace the memories with the present, replacing healthy wooden climbing frames and children's laughter with rotten figures that barely looked like their old selves and the almost-silence of this eerie night.

The headlights shone onto the park, and the shadows the rotten frames cast on the trees was enough to make my heart race in its cage. They looked like long spindly hands stretching out from within

hell itself – or the upside down – to try and drag as much as possible from our world back with them before the sun came up.

It looked as if the scene had been stolen from a fairy-tale – one with lots of evil old witches with plots of luring children here to cook them into a pie. No child would dare step here. I wondered, sentimentally, about whether even the butterflies would dare to return. I had returned after all so maybe there was hope for those winged creatures, but then again, maybe the only things attracted to this pile of ravished wood would be moths. I recalled with a shiver, that I had once read a book claiming that Black moths ate butterflies.

It was a welcome distraction when Billy reached behind us to grab our bags. He placed mine in my lap and I thanked him for it – for the bag and not the distraction, although that too was much appreciated. I noticed that he pulled out his food and then tossed his bag back onto the seat, leaving the condoms inside. I didn't quite know why I was so frustrated about him buying those things, maybe it was that I didn't want other people to think that the rumours were true. Maybe it was because they irked me and made me think that sex with Billy was inevitable.

"Come on." Billy said as he opened his car door.

"You want to eat outside?" I asked, voice admittedly embarrassingly high, as he planted his feet on the ground.

"Yeah." He said shortly as he bent to look at me.

"Oh." I thought we'd be eating in the car. I didn't really want to go outside in the dark, it didn't feel safe. I didn't feel safe.

"Oh' what?" He asks, leaning on the door frame and looking in the car at me. He was probably judging my worried expression, trying to decipher what was wrong. But then again, this was Hargrove and I wasn't quite sure whether he cared enough to figure out what was wrong with me.

"It's just- it's dark is all." I admit.

"Aww, is the Little Princess scared of the dark?" He asked in a

condescending and high voice as if he were speaking to a baby rather than the girl who'd sucked him off like a slut in the boys' locker room.

I scowled in response, crossing my arms. His eyes rolled when he saw me.

"I'll keep the headlights on." He said, willing to compromise.

"But it looks creepy if you leave them on." I whined.

"Should I turn them off then?" He sounded tired.

The thought of complete darkness brought back flashes from the upside down and my recent nightmares.

I quickly shook my head. He rolled his eyes again before he shut his door with a thud. I saw him walk around the car, the headlights making his body seem ghoulishly white. He trod over to my side of the car before opening my door.

"Your Highness." He said, playfully as he held the door open for me.

I got out of the car, my body lightly trembling as he shut the door behind me. It was cold but that wasn't why I was shivering. Once my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see that the field stretched out beyond the car and the park and the treeline was barely visible as the sky blended seamlessly into the trees and the trees blended effortlessly into the grass. It reminded me of the plot of land where the portal to the upside down was, which I later found out to be a pumpkin patch oddly enough. The only distinguishable feature about this remarkably dark and uneven land was the leafless old oak that stood proud amongst the dark, despite being so lonesome. I needed some of that tree's courage.

My eyes found Billy, his muscular form draped on the hood of the car, his feet firmly on the ground and back slightly hunched over his food. I walked around to him, sat on the car, my feet dangling inches above the wet grass. I felt safer knowing that the old oak was watching over us; a guardian; a last and rare remnant from my time here as a child. Somehow, this warmed me and made me feel safer.

...

We ate our food in silence, but the silence didn't feel awkward like it would with anyone else. I couldn't help but stare as he licked his fingers clean of the sugar from his sweets. I finished my ice-cream just as his eyes caught me staring. I looked away and hoped he couldn't see the red that marred my cheeks in the dark.

I noticed that Billy was still looking at me. He was staring. It made me self-conscious. My head nodded away from him, avoiding his gaze, but I could still feel the weight of his eyes on me. With a glance over to him I saw that his eyes were focused on my lips. He brought his hand up to my face and my breath got stuck in my throat, creating a lump that wouldn't go away. He rubbed some ice-cream away from the corner of my mouth with his thumb before bringing it to his own mouth and sucking the substance off.

I licked my lips as I watched the corner of his thumb disappear into his mouth. He slowly, tantalizingly removed it from his mouth, perhaps knowing that my eyes would follow his hand as he brought it down to the top of his leg, resting his wet thumb dangerously close to his crotch area.

I felt my cheeks burn.

I shivered.

"Are you cold." He asked, though it didn't register as a question.

He slipped off the hood, coming to stand before me. His large hands pulled me by the underside of my legs to edge of the hood before he parted them and came to stand between my aching thighs. I could feel the space between my legs pulse with anticipation. He slid off his jacket, his body flexing as he removed it, enabling me to see the contours of his chest through his t-shirt as it stretched taught against his skin. He brought his still warm jacket around my shoulders, his hands trailed along my shoulders to the collar of it. He used the collar to bring me closer to him. All I could smell was *him*.

He caught my eyes and I wanted to look away, but I found myself trapped, unable to part gazes once our eyes had met. Blue on brown.

Cold on warm. Beautiful on ordinary.

His face inched toward mine.

"You still owe me a kiss, remember?" He purred, voice low and predatory.

How could I forget?

His breath tickled my skin like feathers. He was only an inch away.

He pressed our lips pressed together. I was still for a moment, not sure of how to proceed. Then the moist wetness of his tongue ran along the slit of my mouth, jolting me into action. Our mouths moved together, smoothing and caressing each other. His tongue danced into mine as they met inside my mouth. He swallowed my whimper. I felt more than heard his moan against my swollen lips.

I dug my hands into his hair and tugged on his dirty blonde strands. He held my waist captive with large hands as he pushed me onto my back. His mouth never left mine as his weight pressed down on me. I became agonisingly aware of the hard planes of his body pressing onto me.

We separated for breath before he came back swiftly and nipped at my bottom lip. He firmly pressed his mouth onto mine continuing with vigour in his explorations of my mouth and tongue with firm strokes. The warm wetness of his kiss made my lower stomach heat up, tie itself into tight knots that would take skilled hands to undo.

I moved my hands from his hair to his shoulders to his back and I was mesmerised by the hard muscles moving under my fingers. He fisted my clothes, pulled my skirt up so that it was just the thin fabric of my tights that separated me from him. His hands jerked my hips up, pulled me flush against his. I could feel his hard length straining in his jeans, needing to be free. The aching between my thighs pulsed again. I felt myself becoming hotter, wetter.

His zipper brushed against the sensitive bundle of nerves in between my thighs and I ached for more. For a stray moment, I wondered if the friction would create a hole in my tights but then one earth

shattering thrust of his hips was enough to quiet my thoughts altogether. I gasped, mouth parting from Billy's. He carried on sucking and licking my jaw, then he moved his tongue and trailed it up and down my neck, sending pulses to my stomach. He rubbed his jeans into to me, and I felt him smirk into my skin. I gasped and shivered and wined as his hips rocked steadily into mine.

I moved my hands under his t-shirt, marvelling at the movement of his muscles as they moved against me. I matched his rhythm, used my grip on his hips as leverage to pull my hips closer to his so that I could arch to rock into his clothed cock. To think that we were only separated by a few layers of clothing made shivers dance down each vertebrae of my spine.

Our joint thrusts were quickly sending me over the edge. We rocked and rubbed and thrust against each other. At a certain angle the zipper, pushed up because of his straining cock pushing against it, brushed my clit. My eyes fluttered closed, Billy flicked his tongue over my collarbone, thrusted again... again... which sent me into waves of pleasure. I cried out against the side of Billy's face as I felt my walls contract in on themselves. My nails dug into the skin of his waist as I tried to hold on to this moment.

Billy still madly jerked his hips into mine, chasing his own release. Once my vision cleared, I realised what he needed; skin to skin contact. My hand snaked in between us feeling the tight quivering muscles of his stomach before I brought it to the waistband of his jeans. He stilled, and I could feel his small intake of breath against my neck.

My hand ventured inside his jeans. My eyes grew wider as I found that he wasn't wearing underwear. No underwear in this weather? Was he crazy? Well, this Billy we're talking about; I already know how mad he is. Going commando in Winter wasn't actually that shocking of a move for him. Plus, it meant that less clothing got in the way of what I was about to do.

I tentatively cupped him, wrapped my fingers around him. I stroked the length of him and I marvelled at how thick he felt. I found pre-cum leaking from it and used it to make my hand slick as I rubbed him. I smirked as I heard him swallow a groan as I cupped the head.

Empowered by his groan of pleasure I became more confident in my movements, increased the speed and pressure of them. He nodded repeatedly into my neck the speed grew.

I twisted my palm and he growled at the new angle. I tried to move my wrist in circular movements, hand slick with precum. I wanted to feel him moan into my heated flesh.

I stroked and cupped and trailed my hand along his hard flesh and felt it pulse in my hand. I increased my speed again, wanting to feel the strings of hot cum, needing him to feel his release. He moaned against my skin, forehead sliding down to press into my collarbone as his hips jerked and twitched into my palm.

He went rigid before I felt it; hot liquid that spread over my wrist. He cried out into my breast, tried to conceal the whimpers that came with every string that shot out of him. When it was over, he stilled before he lay over me. His head was pressed against my breast, his stomach pressing in between my legs. I felt his heated breath move against my blouse.

I brought my hand out of his pants and felt the liquid rapidly cool in the air. I studied the pearly substance thinking of how I had swallowed that down in the boys' locker room at Billy's demand. My stomach felt empty now, even though I'd just eaten. I tried to wipe it off on my tights.

Billy rolled off me then, leaving me feeling as if something was missing without him pressing his weight atop me. We lay together on the hood of his Camaro, blood on fire but cooling now with our joint releases. We were still too mystified – shocked, awed, tired, confused, scared – to talk.

But then, the chilled metal of the car grounded me, reminded me that I should not have done that with him.

I sat up, leaning on my elbows as I snuck a glance at him. I looked to his lower body first, wondering what the mess in his trousers felt like to him.

Deciding that I probably shouldn't think about that, I hurriedly

switched my gaze to his upper body. His chest was lightly heaving, his arm draped over his stomach as his eyes focused on the sky. I too looked up to the stars, being calmed by their unchanging nature which was so uncommon in life. The stars, at least, were constant. Down here on Earth, hardly anything was truly reliable or unchanging. I couldn't quite figure out if that made Earth beautiful or chaotic. Maybe both; a chaotic beauty that made us distinctly us and not those things from the upside down. I wondered then about the aimless and destructive nature of the upside down. What place did the upside down have in the universe? Why was it here? And what did it want? I thanked God that El or Jane (or whatever her name was) was able to close the gate. I just hoped that whatever came from that place had died when the portal closed.

I felt someone looking at me, their eyes itching my skin. My head turned to find Billy staring at me. His hair was messy, flat in places and sticking up in others. His cheeks were tinged pink and if he weren't looking at me so intensely with an unreadable expression painted onto his face, I perhaps would have giggled at how cute the sight was. His blue eyes were glazed over yet intensely focused, seeming as if they held a burning desire to say something.

If this were some romantic movie I imagined the scene would play out like so;

"You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen." The actor whispered before tucking a strand of hair behind the actress's ear. He licked his lips, preparing for a passionate kiss that was scripted to happen in a few lines to come.

The actress would reply with a cliché line:

"That's just because we're sitting in the dark, silly." She spoke, her perfect appearance making the modesty seem all the more potent in making her a relatable or down to earth type of character.

But this was not some dumb romantic movie. And I knew that it was ridiculous, but for a glimmering second, I did think that he would say that I was beautiful. Or I thought he would say something passionate. Something real and true. Or at least *something*. I thought the real Billy would speak to me, not the ever-arrogant Hargrove.

But he didn't say anything; his mouth did not open. The only movement he made was the slight clench of his jaw.

Then he spoke, but it wasn't what I wanted him to say. I doubt it was what he wanted to say either.

"It's probably time to go." He said, voice stiff.

He was cutting himself off from me. I nodded. He looked away from me.

"How long until you have to pick Max up?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even as I slid off his car, my fingertips trailing down behind my body, flesh dragging against the metal.

He looked to his watch, trying to angle it to face the headlights so that he could see. He kept twisting his wrist, not being able to see the number because of the light shining off the glass. But eventually he was able to read it.

"About twenty minutes." He said. "So, I'll drop you back now. Then I'll pick up Max."

We both climbed into his car, my heart still beating wildly, and lips still swollen and pulsing from his kiss.

He played no music on the way back.

...

He parked just a little way away from my house, so that Steve didn't hear the engine or see the car. I had thanked him for the ride and was about to get out, but then I grit my teeth and pulled his jacket tighter around me in preparation. There were some things I wanted – no, needed – to say before I left.

"Billy." I firmly said. I let his name sit in the car for a moment like a newly opened bottle of wine.

"What is it, Clare?" He said, voice stiff and low, predatory. On edge. He was an animal trapped in a cage and each bar of that cage represented some injustice I'd somehow done to him.

But then I realised what he said. I focused on him then, trying to remember the last time he'd said my name. Had his lips ever formed my name in his mouth before? Had his tongue ever tasted it before? It was likely that he hadn't. I felt as if he'd said something that couldn't be taken back, something concrete and irreversible. But I told myself that that was stupid and that he'd only said my name; it was nothing special. I doubt Billy never even noticed saying it – I hardly noticed when I had began calling him 'Billy' instead of 'Hargrove' and I still can't quite place when I started doing so. But Billy... He probably didn't even care. Maybe he just wasn't in the mood to call me 'Princess'. Maybe he was just in the mood to punch something.

I decided to carry on. To face the questions and confusion that plagued my thoughts.

"The park." I said, simply. I watched him as I spoke, wanting to be able to sense if a storm was brewing. "What we did there..."

His jaw tightened.

"... and in the boys' locker room..." I carried on.

He didn't speak. His jaw was flexing.

"I just- I want to know what's going on." My heart jumps in its cage as I confront what our relationship is. "Between us, I mean."

He gave no reply. The air continued to thicken like blood with his silence.

"I mean, you're so... sweet one minute – kind, even – and the next you make me feel like some- some *slut*–"

"You're not." He cut me off.

"What?" My eyes start to burn.

"A *slut*." He says, simply, but I could tell that neither of us were finding this conversation simple. "You're not like those other girls."

"Like those other girls'." I repeat, my blood flaring and boiling in my

veins. "Like the ones that 'put out'." I remind him of his earlier words, words that had stung me, cut into my flesh like needles. But as soon as they'd left my mouth a bad taste set in.

He fixed his eyes onto his hands that were white on the steering wheel.

A need to apologize to him washed over me, but I had to push that urge back, make it disappear. Neither of us would apologize to the other. We were both stubborn in that way.

I gave it a minute before speaking again, my voice piercing the air between us.

"Look, you can still stay over if- if things get *bad*." I almost whisper and for a moment I wonder if he'd heard but then his hands tightened on the wheel, a reaction to my words.

I studied him. The side of his face had an edge of sadness marring it, an expression long and often hidden by his mask of malice. If my heart were attached to strings, Billy would be my puppeteer, my master. With the slightest alter in his facial expression – whether that be sorrow, pain, anger or joy – I would mirror him. I was a puppet pulled by empathetic strings.

So, it was then that without thinking, I said the words I somehow hadn't realized had been hidden within myself. I hadn't noticed they were there, deep within my stomach, but now I did notice them and they flooded to the surface, ready and wanting – no, needing – to be heard by him. So, my mouth formed the words and gave them life.

"I care about you."

The words hung on my tongue for a moment before falling off into the chasm between us. They fluttered away from me, falling then rising then fading away, as if they were never even spoken. But the truth was still there, the feel of them was still there and that would never go away; he knew I cared about him.

I cared about him.

But he said nothing.

His fists tightened on the wheel.

"I'm uh..." He paused. "I'm going to be late picking up Maxine, so are we done here?"

He didn't even look at me as he said it.

My chest went numb.

"...Yeah." I replied on autopilot.

Before I could recognise what I had done, I was out of the car, walking to my house. I didn't hear his engine speed away like I knew it had. I didn't see anything; my eyes were too blurry. I didn't feel the tracks of wetness falling down my cheeks. When I opened the door to my house and Steve saw me and hugged me, I didn't feel his arms around me. I didn't feel him tuck me into bed with a hot water bottle. I didn't see him hang Billy's jacket in my wardrobe with slightly confused and expression. I didn't see his temper rise as he figured out who the jacket belonged to. I didn't see his worried face or hear him pace in his bedroom later on.

I only knew that getting closer to Billy, growing to care for him, had perhaps been a mistake.

Billy did not come over that night.

...

This is my fave chapter so far! Hope you all enjoyed!

It would be interesting if you guys would let me know if you have a favourite or least favourite chapter. Or even a favourite or least favourite scene so far. I'm really interested. Plus, it will let me know what you guys like to read about, therefore I will be able to write *more* of what you like. Seem like a good deal?

Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed! Thank you so much for reading!

Have a good week!

8. Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Thank you to everyone who reviewed/favourited/followed! How the heck has this story managed to get 58 reviews?! WOW! Thank you all so much! I've had a stressful time at uni lately so getting reviews or follows or favourites really brighten up my day.

A guest asked why I had a review goal and I guess its just because they're very motivational and I'm the kind of person who is kind of OCD about keeping on track and I guess reviews are a way of telling if what I'm writing is ok or not. Honestly, I just like hearing from you guys.

Okay, I'll stop talking ... you can read now lol...

...

Chapter 8: Out of sight, out of mind

22nd November 1984

Hopper

MISSING

There that word was again. Big boldened red letters, letters that looked like blood spilled onto alphabet blocks.

MISSING

It was one of those words he would teach to El – or Jane – in parts, tell her to separate it, find smaller words so that she could read it easier.

Toothbrush became tooth-brush.

Armchair became arm-chair.

Running became run-ning.

Missing became miss-ing.

Missing was a word he hadn't liked to teach her. It was too familiar. Like her mother's missing mind, her missing father figure, her missing childhood. It was a word that he too was all too aware of. Hopper swallowed as he recalled the MISSING posters of Will and the Holland girl. He remembered Joyce at the funeral. He remembered dragging the boy's body out of the quarry – though now he knew it wasn't a real body, it still tormented his thoughts sometimes. He didn't want to see another dead child, not after- *after Sara*.

MISSING

The tv screen glared at him. The reporter, Brenda Wood, was reading the teleprompter about disappearances in the next town over. He thought, somewhat selfishly, that he was glad that it wasn't his job to find those people. He didn't want that. Not after the last time. He blinked and saw Barbara Holland's veined face, moist and swollen. He had flashes of carrying Will's emaciated grey form out of the upside down.

He rubbed his face as he tried to shake off memories, ones that plagued the depths of his consciousness and almost never let him be. It was getting better though, now that El was here to distract him.

He reached down to switch the TV set off. He was greeted by a black screen that reflected his own aging face, he wondered if this black and white reflection was what he would look like if he were on one of those missing posters.

He stood and rubbed at his face as he turned from TV set. At least the word MISSING was gone now (which Hopper thought was darkly ironic). Out of sight, out of mind.

"El?" He called into the cabin. "You ready?"

It was thanksgiving, and normally he wouldn't do much. He hadn't really celebrated it since moving to Hawkins. A few years ago, there had been a gathering at the station where the food was plentiful, but other than that one time, he hadn't really done anything other than work extra hours or sit alone, eat and get drunk.

But this year, he had El to look after. He probably would have just made Eggos with cranberry sauce for El had Joyce not offered to have them over. So, there Hopper was, dressed in his most formal flannel shirt tucked into brown trousers, ready for the journey over to the Byers household.

El opened her door and stepped out, her yellow dress, styled hair and pale skin making her look like one of the dolls Sara used to play with.

"Look okay?" She asked, pulling at the sleeves. She adjusted them so that they weren't quite so puffed out.

"You look great, kid." Hopper nodded and tried for a smile but it was barely there. "Ready now?"

"You have flowers?" El questioned him, eyes narrowing. "And whisky?"

Hopper nodded.

The flowers and whisky were their gifts to Joyce for inviting them. El had picked the flowers, she'd liked the bouquet that had orange and burnt red roses with yellowed autumn leaves and daisies whereas Hopper had picked the whisky – something for him and Joyce later in the evening.

As El continued to stare quietly at him, he picked up the presents from the table, holding them up in one hand so that El could see them. Her eyes relaxed then and she walked over to the shoe rack and put her matching yellow shoes on as he took his keys from the pot on the shelf. Hopper and El shrugged on their coats before they exited, and he locked the door after them.

It had been just under a month since he'd seen Joyce – the last time being a few days after Bob's funeral. He wondered if she'd be happy today. He wanted to see her smile again.

...

Once he pulled up, he saw that the Harrington kid's car was parked next to Jonathan's. It looked like Joyce had invited the Harrington kids as well as him and El. *The more, the merrier*, he thought, despite

the bitter headache that was building. He thought that he would be able to put off this particular headache – the one he got when he was around kids – until later, when all the kids from 'the Party' came over for a game of Dungeons and Dragons. But, to Hopper's tired annoyance, this headache was one he was becoming more and more familiar with now that El was a part of his life.

He knocked on the door, twice. El was holding the vase of flowers, he was holding the whisky. He knocked again, the pounding noise reminded him of his headache. He heard voices behind the door. He heard Joyce's voice telling someone to open it. Then, he heard a lock being twisted before the door creaked open.

A girl opened the door, she looked pale, fragile. Her big brown eyes were dark holes in white paper. It was the girl – Clare? – who had gone with Steve and the kids into the upside down to create a diversion for El.

Two years after moving back to Hawkins, he remembered the Hannah Moller case. The case that disturbed this quiet town. He thought he'd left cases where beauty queens got themselves in a bad way like that back in the Big City. The Moller girl had proved him wrong. It was obvious what had happened, yet he still investigated it at the parent's behest. Afterwards, the Moller's had left town, their only precious girl gone. Hopper had done this too, once.

He remembered her – the Harrington girl, who had been friends with Hannah Moller. He was dryly saddened that her eyes still held that same sheen of loss that she had back then. Although this sorrow had toughened, thickened and dried like clay over her eyes. It was something that would always be there now. She'd blink out the clay like tears and move on with her life as best she could. Her brown doe eyes were like his own eyes, eyes that he noticed had melted and burnt after Sara and hardened after Diane.

The Harrington girl's tired eyes widened, smile moulded itself onto her face as she greeted them with a 'Chief!' and an 'El, right?'. El nodded, demur smile on her face. The Harrington girl told them in a soft voice that reminded him of El when she was sleepy to come in and that Joyce was still cooking. They came in, hung their coats and slipped off their shoes and followed the girl to the living room.

Jonathan and Will were there, sat on the couch, watching cartoons.

"Why aren't you helping your mom with the food?" Hopper asked.

"We set the table!" Will exclaimed, eager to impress the Chief. "And mom said we'd be helping her more by staying out of her way. Jonathan's looking after me."

Jonathan, shy and quiet as usual, gave a nod which verified Will's tale.

Hopper grabbed the flowers off El, told her he'd be back in a sec, and left the two teens and preteens by the couch and went over to the kitchen area.

...

Joyce was bent over the stove with mismatched oven mitts on while Steve was peeling potatoes. The older Harrington was, surprisingly, helping Joyce out in the kitchen. Steve waved with the potato peeler in hand as he saw the Chief. Hopper nodded back.

When Joyce saw him, her eyes lit up, the shine in them making her eyes seem even wider than Hopper's Chevrolet headlights.

"Hop!" She came over to him, hugged him before he could move back. He wasn't sure if he even wanted to avoid her hug. Her arms circled him, warmed his insides. But he could only hug back with one hand – the other juggling the vase of flowers and the straps of the bag the whisky was sitting in.

As she pulled back, a smile formed, her pink lips stretching wide. The smile made its way to her eyes and Hopper thought; *that's the smile I wanted to see*. It was one that instantly made up for parting from their embrace. It made Hopper smile too.

Hopper didn't see Steve notice their moment of peace. He didn't see the fresh scars on Steve's heart, the heart that ached to have someone look at him the way Joyce and Hopper looked at each other.

...

"Oh, Steve, honey this is delicious!" Joyce nodded as she chewed the chocolate cake Steve had brought over.

"Thanks, Ms Byers!" Steve nodded, smile on his face and hair flopping along with his nods. "I love chocolate cake."

"It took him all morning to make." Clare chimed in. "He said he wanted it to be fresh."

"Yeah." Steve said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I wasn't gonna leave it to go stiff in the refrigerator."

"Well thank you, we all really appreciate it." Joyce said, eyes crinkling beautifully as she smiled.

"Well, we should thank you." Steve replied as he gestured to himself and Clare with his licked clean spoon. "For having us over. And cooking for us."

"Yeah, thanks, Joyce." Clare said. "It's really nice to be here."

Hopper breathed deeply, quietly though so no one heard, and thought about Mr and Mrs Harrington. The affluent couple was hardly ever in town, they always jetted off somewhere for what Hopper assumed was business.

That was his biggest regret; letting his job get in the way of his time with Sara. It was occasional, yes, and he played with her often but there were still the few times that he hadn't been there. Sometimes he questioned what memories he'd have of her that he didn't have now if he'd have just been there. He'd have to live with those thoughts now.

He hoped that Mr and Mrs Harrington would grow to regret leaving their kids alone so much, but Hopper hoped that it wouldn't take either Clare or Steve's deaths to make them realise this.

Hopper had his silver lining now though. He had a girl to look after. A girl that could move things with her mind, a girl that was quick at learning to read, a girl that was easy to cook for, a girl that was quickly growing on him. A girl that was like a second chance. He needed that second chance, he was starved for it. He just hoped he wouldn't fuck it up.

The girl in question raised her hand and put it on his and said quietly that they should thank Joyce too. So, they did. And Joyce smiled. And they all talked. And laughed. And ate until Steve's homemade chocolate cake – that really was damn good – was finished.

The atmosphere now held a glow that reflected the orange-yellow sunlight that streamed into the dining area, a warmth that Hopper had felt in Joyce's smile earlier.

...

After they had washed the dishes and cleaned up the table, the doorbell rang.

"Perfect timing." Will said as he rushed to open the door.

Hopper braced himself for another headache.

...

D&D was a loud game. Hopper watched them play and found himself wishing that there were still plates to wash. If he were doing something with his hands, then it might dull the pounding in his temples. *Well, there's the whisky*, he reminded himself. Maybe it wasn't so smart to drink now – he did have to drive back with El later – but he figured with the tolerance he'd built over the years that one glass wouldn't hurt.

Hopper made his way to the kitchen. He saw Jonathan and Steve talking – matching stern expressions pulling at their young skin and making them look as if they were plotting something. The same expression was the one that had left fine lines on Hopper's own face.

He heard the name 'Hargrove' come from Steve before they saw him walking their way. They clammed up.

He knew of the Hargrove's, he'd only met them once to welcome them to the town. The father, Neil, was a hard man. A military man. Probably served in Vietnam. He only had curt words for him. The wife, Susan, was softer, a lady who reminded him of his mom. Max was a Mayfield, and nothing at all like her quiet natured mother. And finally, there was Billy Hargrove. He remembered that damn kid. He

recalled the damage done to Harrington's face, damage that still hadn't fully healed. He remembered dragging him up off the floor and giving him a shake down. He sobered up with a glass of water Joyce had brought over before giving a stern talk to him. Hopper had said to drive home and that he'd bring Max back soon and explain to his father why she was so late.

So, understandably, Hopper was curious that the teenage boys had mentioned that name. He reasoned that questioning them about it now would have probably resulted in adding another layer of pain to his already pulsating temples, so he didn't ask. He just nodded to the boys, grabbed the whisky along with two glasses and started his search for Joyce. He'd seen her earlier with Clare. They had made their exit from the house just as the game was heating up, so he resolved to look there first.

...

He shut the front door gently behind him as he didn't want to alert El that he was gone. Once the door had been firmly closed, his head thanked him for the almost-silence gifted by the night sky. He could already feel the pulsing in his temples start to deplete as if his vessels had exhausted themselves and were finding time to rest now that it was quiet.

Hopper turned from the door to see two bodies huddled together to the left and on the far end of porch, as far from the door as they could get. The Harrington girl sat with her head on Joyce's shoulder, with Joyce rubbing her back.

In the moonlight they looked as if they could be mother and daughter, with similar frames, heights, coloring. Of course, Hopper knew that Joyce's hair was a deeper shade of brown than Clare's. It was more of a deep dark chocolate that looked soft to the touch. Clare's hair was lighter, more like a mix of both Hopper's and Joyce's, as if Clare was a child of theirs.

Hopper closed his eyes, trying to stop thoughts of his daughter.

"It'll be ok, sweetie." Joyce whispered. Or at least Hopper thought that was what had been whispered; he wasn't quite able to hear

properly from where he was.

Clare sniffed in response before she picked her head up from Joyce's shoulder and sat up, rubbing at her face as her shoulders huffed and quivered. Hopper caught on that the girl was crying and he wondered whether he still had time to duck back into the house.

"I know." The girl said, turning to Joyce.

If Hopper moved, she'd see him from her peripheral vision.

"Just try and stay away from him." Joyce said.

Him? *Ugh, she's having boy trouble.* If there wasn't a chance of Hopper being spotted he would've returned indoors. He'd rather have a headache from the damn kids rather than one from a girl crying about a boy. He hoped to put that particular headache off at least until El was in high school. Though he supposed that El already had a boy; Mike. He frowned.

"You're right." Clare sniffed before she paused. "Yesterday... when we were in the store... you didn't see what he bought, did you?"

"Uh, no." Joyce sounded confused.

Clare exhaled before she said; "Good."

Before Joyce could question Clare, she was pulled into a tight hug.

"Thank you for always looking out for me." Clare murmured into Joyce's hair. "I know I've been kind of distant from you and Jonathan for a few years, but I really did miss you guys. I want to see you more often. You're... you were always like a mom to me."

Hopper felt something in chest twist. 'Like a mom to me', she had said, which made Hopper once more think about the absent Harringtons'.

"It's fine, sweetie." Joyce replied, somewhat awed by Clare's confession. "You always used to be like my little girl."

Clare pulled away from the hug and wiped at her face once more

before standing. She was about to turn. She was about to catch him eavesdropping (though it wasn't as if it had been intentional).

Hopper swiftly placed his hand onto the door's handle and thought that maybe he could pretend that he'd only just come out here and that he hadn't seen any of their conversation. He took a breath, opened the door a crack before shutting it loudly, and altered his body language so that it appeared as though he'd just come through the door.

The girls turned their heads to him. Both females shared expressions with raised eyebrows and opened mouths.

His plan had worked.

"Hi, Hop." Joyce greeted, face melting into an odd expression (her forehead creased as if confused, yet her lips were set in a small smile as if she were amused).

"Oh." He said, playing innocent. "Hi, girls."

"Chief." Clare nodded before turning to Joyce. "I think I'll leave you two to be together."

She sent a smirk to Joyce before she walked towards Hopper, nodded at him with a coy smile before she entered the house again, leaving the two adults to themselves.

He walked over to Joyce, held the whisky and the two glasses up in offering. She smiled. He smiled back before sitting where the girl had been sat just moments before.

"So, Hop." Joyce begins. "How long were you there for, huh?"

He huffed a deep breath.

"Long enough to figure out that she's having boy problems." He frowned, before placing the glasses between them. He opened the bottle as Joyce shook her head at him.

"I don't think she noticed you." Joyce supplied. "But your super detective skills weren't enough to go under my radar."

He poured the whisky into their glasses, holding in a sigh at the comfortingly familiar sound of alcohol hitting the bottom of a glass.

He handed her the glass and she thanked him.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Hop." She said, holding her glass up in a toast.

"Happy Thanksgiving." He replied as they clinked their glasses together.

The light in her eyes warmed her more than the whisky.

...

When Hopper and Joyce had returned indoors, it was in the middle of a startling sentence.

"Have you made the lost posters yet?" Max had asked, oblivious to the thoughts that scraped through Hopper's mind. Thoughts and memories of Will and Barbara Holland's black and white pictures on lost posters. Missing person posters. The rigid blood letters of this morning were making one hell of a comeback today.

He blinked and saw it again.

MISSING

The damn word was somehow seared onto the inside of his eyelids.

MISSING

He glanced at Joyce and wondered if she had similar thoughts. He wondered if she was remembering choosing the picture of Will that would end up on his lost posters. Was she thinking of when she had photocopied them, plastered them around town? Did she remember watching them blow around on the ground – trash – weeks after Will had returned? Did she think they were pointless, a waste of time? After all, she couldn't plaster posters of her boy in the upside down.

At the risk of another headache, he spoke.

"Who's missing?" That damn word. He had to stop himself from

grating his teeth together.

The kids looked at him and he looked back, his cop face slid into place, added another wrinkle to the leather of his face.

"No one." Clare spoke, voice high and girlish and only slightly annoying.

"What's with the 'lost posters' then?" Hopper asked, impatient. The buzz from Joyce and the whisky was starting to fade. Too quickly, he thought. He'd only just drank the whisky. It was too soon to sober up. He only just fought monsters and helped the kids and helped El shut the gate. It was too soon for someone else to go missing or for something else to go wrong.

MISSING.

Not again. Not in this town. The reporter from this morning made it clear that it was another town's problem now.

"Clare and Billy found a dog." Max supplied an answer.

Clare and Billy Hargrove? Maybe that was what Jonathan and Steve were tensely talking about earlier. Could this be the boy that Joyce was telling her to stay away from? It would make sense, Joyce had experience with volatile partners and Billy Hargrove was nothing if not volatile.

"And they took it to the vets." Dustin said, forehead wrinkled. "Which is *weird*. I would've thought Bully would've kicked it rather than help."

"Is it really that hard to believe that he'd help?" Clare spoke, crossing her arms.

"Yes." Mike answered shortly.

"Shut up, Mike!" Max exclaimed, as she harshly slapped him on the shoulder.

Before anyone realised, Max's hand had been slammed onto the table, away from Mike. Max's eyes widened before they travelled to find El.

Once she was in Max's sights, her blue eyes narrowed.

"Let go." Max growled.

Hopper, who had realised what she was doing said El's name as his warning for her to stop.

Max's hand was then released, and from the decrease in pressure it flew back from table.

"El." Hopper said, voice low. "What have I told you?"

"She hit Mike." El's voice rose, forehead creasing with the injustice of her situation.

"El." Hopper said again. "Apologize."

The boys, Joyce and Clare all stared at the exchange between them and for a second Hopper feared that he was being too harsh. But really, he knew that El needed to be treated like any other kid, that was the only way she'd ever adjust to life outside of Hawkins' lab.

"Apologize." Hopper repeated.

"No." She replied, defiantly. Her jaw muscles tightened.

"El." His voice grew firmer.

They continued to stare at one another, contesting each other's authority. El's eyes narrowed and Hopper was struck by how similar their stances were to old Western gun duals. Joyce placed a hand on his arm, bringing him back from the ledge that he would've fallen over, the ledge that lead to a ravine filled with nothing but anger.

"El, honey." She began, voice tranquil. "It wasn't nice controlling Max like that. Max deserves an apology."

Max smirked as he crossed her arms and sat back in her seat.

"And Max can apologize to Mike as well." Joyce smiled.

"Wha—" Max started, sitting up quickly, but was interrupted by a keen

look from Joyce. Max quickly caught on that this was a lesson for El; a lesson in behaving like everyone else.

Max had to push the urge to roll her eyes away, before she opened her mouth to apologize.

"I'm sorry for hitting you." Max said, lips pursing.

"Apology accepted." Mike said smugly as he grinned at her.

"Now it's your turn El." Joyce raised her eyebrows, letting El know that she was waiting for her apology.

"I- I'm sorry." El said, looking Max in the eye.

"Apology accepted." Max nodded as she repeated Mike's words, though she didn't repeat the smug grin that he'd given Max.

As this was happening, Hopper looked on at Joyce, awed by her. He couldn't help but think that she was an amazing mother, and El really needed one of those.

...

Thanks for reading!

And yes, I ship Joyce and Hopper.

I really enjoyed writing this although it really is not my best writing. It was weird to write Clare from someone else's perspective, but it was enjoyable. Also, momma Steve made another appearance! I figure that Steve is great at cooking, I'm not quite sure why I think that, I just do.

Just curious; who's POV would you like to see?

9. Changing Tides

Some of you actually missed Clare which makes me feel like I'm doing something right with her character, yay! I'm sorry about staying away from Clare last chapter. There was just something in that Hopper picks up on which is kind of crucial to the plot. Clare is back in this chapter though! ...after Max's pov...

Bare in mind that this is really rough. I haven't edited/read through as much as I do normally so sorry for any errors.

Enjoy!

Chapter 9: Changing Tides

'Will your tongue still remember the taste of my lips?' – Joji, Will He

Saturday 24th November 1984

Max

Max was sat in the Camaro with her brow furrowed. Billy had been driving fast. Really fast. So much so that Max had a hard time seeing where they were as the houses and street names they passed were too quickly fading off into the rear-view mirror. Max did, however, know the destination; the library. Max inwardly rolled her eyes at herself, the library; where the actual nerds and squares hung out. But then Max reminded herself of her mission; survive the ride with Billy to the library, meet Clare, photocopy the lost posters, skate to Mike's where the gang was meeting up, then plaster the town with the dog's cute and fluffy face. Simple. Or at least, it had seemed that way but now she was stuck in this claustrophobic car with her angry asshole of a step-brother.

Max thought back to when he hadn't been this way; when he had been cool – of course he'd still been an asshole and had probably been one since before they met but Max didn't mind as long as he wasn't an asshole to her – and he would take her to the beach. They lived inland, so it would take an hour or so to drive there. Those

journeys were spent playing 'I spy' or counting how many red cars they could see or talking about video games and school and movies. He told her he'd snuck into the theatre to watch *Mad Max 2* with some friends, which she was dead jealous of but she didn't admit that to him. She made him promise then and there that if they ever made a third movie he'd take her, sneak her in if she was still too young to see it. It was then that he gave her the nickname 'Mad Max' as he laughed and said she was a crazy shithead just like the real one.

But that all ended. Billy got himself in trouble. Max had to tell Neil, she had to. And now they're in Hawkins with no more trips to the beach, no more playing 'I spy' or counting red cars or talking about anything. There was only Billy's anger.

It had gotten better recently though, after she'd threatened the safety of his balls with a bat pierced by nails. She really did live up to her nickname.

"Why are you going to the library?" Billy asked, sounding all at once confused and nonchalant. "You're not fooling me like Neil and Susan. I know you're not going there to study."

"Why do you care?" Max glared in his direction, not wanting to meet his eyes.

"I don't care." Billy bit out. "But I'm your babysitter now, remember? Your *stepbrother*." He took a drag from his cigarette, his intake of breath sounding shaky with agitation. "And that means I have to make sure you don't end up knee deep in shit."

"My hero." Max said, sarcasm dripping from her lips.

"Look, you little shit," He began with a biting tone. "Just tell me what you're doing."

"Fine." Max shook her head in frustration. "I'm photocopying lost posters with Clare."

Billy looked as if he were caught off-guard. Max wasn't used to seeing that flicker of panic in his eyes without Neil around. It seemed that as soon as the panic was on display, it was swiftly burnt over by his

fury.

"What?" He gritted out.

"Yeah," Max continued. "You know, for the dog. Me and Clare talked about it yesterday over at the Byers house."

Billy didn't say anything and instead pressed down on the gas. The engine roared like his flaring temper. Max huffed at him and rolled her eyes.

Billy was back to acting like an angry asshole again and Max was trying to pinpoint when this had happened exactly. He had been fine all week, even after Neil had beaten- *don't think about it*. Max closed her eyes. Her eyes began to burn, *think of something else, Mad Max*.

Wednesday. That had to be when Billy had began acting like a dick again. Max recalled that on Wednesday evening, Billy had picked her up from the Wheeler's in a foul mood. She hadn't said anything, not in the mood to antagonise him. Later in the evening, Neil had talked about some 'impolite brunette' who was a 'friend' of Billy's. Neil made it clear that he wasn't fond of her. Was it possible that he had been talking about Clare? That must have meant that Billy and Clare had been with each other that evening. They must have argued or maybe Billy did something – he always did something – which had caused Billy's shift in temperament.

The more she thought about it, the more plausible it seemed that this 'brunette' Neil had talked about really was Clare.

Max began to question more things about Billy and Clare's relationship. She'd come to the bathroom to help her that day *with* Billy. They'd been driving *together* at night time when they'd found that dog. Why had they been in the car together that night? And, in the vets, Billy had talked about a bet with a predatory grin. What exactly was the bet about?

Max had a disturbing thought then: what if Clare was one of those girls; the ones who were actually *attracted* to Billy? Max had to hold in a shiver of disgust. What if she was? No, she couldn't be. She was too nice for Billy. But then Max thought of Clare defending him at the

Byers last night. Clare had questioned whether it was really that hard to believe that Billy would help the dog. Max thought of the old Billy, the one from California, the one who taught her to surf. It wasn't hard at all to believe that he'd help that dog.

But now, Max had mentioned Clare just a minute ago and Billy had visibly gotten angrier: his hands tightened on the steering wheel and his knuckles turned paper white.

Max wondered if something had happened between them. It would make sense; if they'd hung out and Billy had done or said something to make her back off from him. That was the reason for Billy's weird change in behaviour. Well, Billy wasn't exactly acting weird, he was angry which was normal for him. But for weeks now, since the upside down incident and his fight with Steve, he'd been better. He'd been quieter. The roar of his engine signalled that Angry Billy was back.

Max wanted to know more, needed to find out if her theory about Billy and Clare was true.

Well, he's already angry, Max thought, may as well ask.

"What's with you and Clare?"

He sent a glare her way, reminding her of the Billy from their first few weeks in Hawkins. His eyes were ice and prickled at her skin, warned her that she was stomping on ice that was being melted by his fury. She thought it was funny though; that they shared almost identical blue eyes despite only being related by marriage. This was how she able to shoot ice back at him, reminding him with one glare that she wasn't to be fucked with. *Bat to the balls*, she warned with her eyes.

Billy shook his head and returned his eyes to the road.

"Why does it matter?" He growls.

"Because I like Clare." She shrugged as she thought of Clare. She'd helped her when she got her period for the first time. She was glad that it was Clare who had to explain things, rather than Billy. Max grimaced as she thought of that possible scenario.

"Well?" Max sighed. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." Billy's voice was tight.

It sure didn't seem like nothing to Max, not when he got this worked up.

"Why're your panties in a bunch then?" She froze for just a second and hoped that she hadn't gone too far. She'd gotten too familiar, treated him like he was California Billy instead of Hawkins Billy.

"Stop talking, Max." He growled.

There was something in the blue electric of his eyes and his tensed shoulders which made her fear that not even the threat of a bat to the balls would stop him from going over the edge. So, she simply crossed her arms and decided to remain silent for the rest of the drive.

...

Clare was stood by the entrance, her knee length floral dress blowing in the harsh winter weather. Max thought she was crazy for wearing something like that this time of year.

She turned to Billy, intent on telling him that she was skating home, but the words clogged in her throat at the sight of him. He was looking at Clare, observing her. His eyes were burning, though not with fury. The blue orbs held all the passion and heat of fire and all the strength and rapidity of water. She'd never seen that look on Billy before, she had never wanted to. It was strange.

There was definitely *something* going on between them. Though Max doubted it was like the other girls from Billy's spare time. The way he looked at Clare made that clear.

Just then, Clare turned toward the car. She had spotted them.

Billy seemed to wrench his gaze away from her and onto Max.

"You're skating home, right?" He asked, agitated.

"Yes." Max replied, shortly.

"Good." *Good riddance*, was what she thought he really meant.

Max moved to open the door, but Billy locked it. She turned to him, scowl firmly set on her freckled face.

"If you're hanging out with Sinclair again, you'd better hope Neil doesn't find out." He growled, as he held his cigarette out the window.

She didn't say anything, instead focusing on the cigarette in his hand. The wind played with the fine strands of smoke as it pulled the cancerous air away from the car and into the sky.

"*Ma-ax*," He hummed, and it sounded so much like Neil. "You listening?"

She nodded.

"Remember what I said, Max." He said, voice low. "I'm older than you. I've learnt to stay away from those people."

He paused, taking a breath as he seemed to be mulling things over.

"Just don't get caught." He said, which caught Max off-guard. She furrowed her brows. Did this mean that he'd no longer give a crap about her hanging out with Lucas as long as she wasn't caught by Neil? She felt a small thread of hope tug at the corners of her lips. She nearly thanked him but decided against it and instead asked him to unlock the car doors. He did, and she exited the car with her skateboard tucked firmly under her arm.

She found Clare watching the car as it drove away, her eyes not leaving the Camaro until it had driven around the corner and disappeared from sight.

...

Monday 26th November 1984

Clare

My eyes focus on my clock. It read 1:33am. I closed my eyes and rolled them beneath my lids in frustration at myself. *Why can't I sleep?* I asked myself. Oh yes, for two very annoying reasons.

One: there was this awful buzzing noise and it's become more than distracting; it's deafening. It just wouldn't stop, it was endless. But I was somehow too tired to find out what it was, yet not tired enough to drown out the noise altogether and sleep.

Two: my body was itching. So much so that it felt as though the bedsheets were crawling around my skin as if trying to irritate me into action.

And it worked, I thought as I reached down to itch my upper leg, my nails ripped and tore, created microscopic cuts in my flesh. For a moment there was bliss and the itching and buzzing seemed to fade away. But then the moment passed. The same spot I had itched became somehow even more irritated than before. I reached down again, determined to stop the fire under my skin from spreading.

When I itched that time, something under my nail was *wet*. I cursed as I brought it up to my face, thinking that I must have cut the skin of my leg. I sat up, turned my lamp on and examined my nail. What I found was not blood. What lay between the skin of my finger and my nail appeared to be a small wing. I was taken back to my childhood then, to my music box which housed a tiny dancing fairy. The wing under my nail wasn't all that dissimilar from the fairy's, the only difference being that the one from under my nail was still attached to half of a body. The body of a dead fly.

It's wing twitched as if it were still alive.

I grimaced as I used a tissue from my side table to remove the fly from under my nail. Then something small and black caught my eye, something that moved. Something alive. I turned my head to find dozens of flies on my pillows, my bedsheets, the whole of my bed.

They were the cause of the buzzing.

They were the cause of the itching.

My eyes and mouth widened as I sprung from the bed. I brushed my hands along my body, trying to remove any and all insects. I stripped down, intent on ridding myself of their tiny black forms.

Despite trying to rid my body of the tiny creatures, my skin was still crawling as if their little legs still scuttled about.

As my breathing started to regulate, I still had no idea of how to remove them from my bedsheets. And I still have no thoughts as to how they got there in the first place. They seem to be grasping to life, their minuscule bodies twitching and struggling to move.

Then a voice that came seemingly from nowhere silenced the buzzing of the flies. It seemed to be coming from behind my door. I walked over and pressed my ear against the wood in an effort to hear more. It was a female voice, gentle as it sang a soothing lullaby. I was once again reminded of my music box that played a similar tune.

I felt a shiver run up my spine as I placed my hand on the door handle. I remembered that I have only my underwear to guard me from the cold, but I didn't allow that to stop me. I turned the handle, ready and needing to hear more of that voice.

I was brought into the hallway and the oppressive walls moulded my journey, pushed me to the stairs which I gladly took in pursuit of the voice. It sounded motherly as it soothed me into going into the basement. The voice is a web, and I the fly that's caught in it. But I went willingly to the spider. I went willingly to death.

Before I noticed it, I was stood in front of the dark wooden doors that led to the basement. Steve called it the storm cellar, but this place would only protect me from storms outside. I wasn't safe from the storm within the house, which was growing with each day. And with each dream I grew closer to exiting the eye of the storm and having to survive gusts of wind that will thrash at my flesh like a lion's tongue.

I entered the basement, and it was silent. No buzzing, no voice. All I heard were the pipes dripping, the sound of it bounced off the walls and back. On and on. It's endless like the buzzing of the flies in my bed.

In the middle of the floor sat a box. A small black chest. I recognise it. I had nearly touched it once. The desire to hold it came over me again like a wave. I rushed to it, crouched by it and smoothed my hands over its black wooden surface.

The initials C.H. greeted me like an old friend. I couldn't help but want to open it, discover what secrets or treasures lay within. I fiddled with the delicate looking padlock that restricts my entry. The weight of annoyance sat heavy in my gut.

A drawn-out growl came from behind me then. I turned, trepidation pulled at my body like heavy chains would a prisoner. The box was still in my hands and acted as a makeshift shield against whatever was hiding the darkness of the basement. It could've been a Demodog. Or a Demogorgon. A new portal could've opened. It had happened here before. Only 20 or 30 feet lay between myself and where Barbara had been taken.

But then I took a breath, calmed myself as I realised that it was only the pipes. They were steadily dripping crimson. I wonder about how rusty they must be in order to drip red liquid.

Then the growling grew. The pipes shuddered. And red drenched the floor. My feet were covered in red. It was wet and hot. I held the box to my chest, needing to save it from the pool of red.

I woke up. I felt the wet and probably red mess under my sheets. I cursed at myself.

Instead of that black box, I was clutching my pillow to my chest. I wondered if that chest exists, but I was too afraid to find out. That would be too much; to find out that my dreams might connect to reality in some way. It was already disturbing to have nightmares and wake up with bloody sheets. That connection between the nightmares and my body was a coincidence that was almost too much to handle, yet it happened. Regularly. And it scared me.

I looked to my clock and it read 1:33am. In a fit of paranoia, I got up and checked my sheets for bugs. Once I had thoroughly checked it twice, I returned to bed. I closed my eyes, willing myself into a dreamless sleep.

...

My watch read 4:30 and the sun seemed to already be making its decent. My appointment with our family doctor was at 4:50, so I wanted to kill a little time before going in which was why I was still sat next to my personal chauffeur in his parked car.

I was fiddling with the car radio, trying to find something that wouldn't remind me of that asshole Hargrove. On Thanksgiving, Joyce had told me to stay away from him. It was good advice but like all advice, it was easier said than done. I'd already seen him once (which happens when you live in small town; you run into people you want to avoid) when he was dropping off Max.

She had been acting strange. The whole time we were photocopying, it was as if she wanted to say something but for some reason was holding her tongue. I hoped that everything at home was okay, but if I asked then that would lead to talking about... Billy. And at that point in time, I was too much of a coward to do that.

It was easy to avoid him in school today as we aren't in the same social circles nor did we have any classes together today. I had seen from a distance, like at the library, which made things easier. I was relieved that I hadn't seen his blue eyes up close, and that I hadn't heard the soft growl of his voice. I couldn't deny that the thought of staying away made my chest tinge with some intangible feeling; a sort of longing.

Tomorrow it would be harder; we had double science and that meant working as partners for a whole two hours. I just hoped he wouldn't touch me. I'd cave, wrap my arms around him, kiss him. Screw anyone watching. Screw Betty and Gloria. Screw the gossip.

Seeing the irritated expression on my face, Steve decided to speak.

"You're okay, right?" Steve asked. "You're not having episodes again?"

He must've thought that my sour expression came from my impending visit to the doctors. The nerves I felt when thinking about the doctors were nothing compared to the shaky ground that was Billy Hargrove.

"No." I shook my head. "I mean, yes, I'm fine. And no, I'm not 'having episodes'."

"So, you're seeing a *normal* doctor then, not-"

"Not Dr. Holmes?" I roll my eyes. "Yeah, Steve. I'm seeing a 'normal doctor'. The physical kind and not the mental, alright?"

"Good." He nodded then looked out the window, unsure of how to continue.

"Steve," I said, placing my hand on his arm. "I'm fine. You don't have to worry."

"I know." His hair looked flatter than normal, as if even his hair was worried about me. "Look, it's my job as your big brother to worry, 'kay?"

My heart warmed at his words.

"Thanks, Steve." I smiled softly.

"So, should I wait for you?" He questioned.

"No, go home. I don't know how long this appointment will be." I said. "But I don't really want to walk home from here. And it'll be getting dark soon. I'll call you when it's over?"

Steve nodded, agreeing with my plan. Then he caught sight of my hand that still rested on his arm. His brow creased as he took in the sight of the bandage. The bandage that Billy had wrapped around my wounded finger. My ring finger.

"What's that from?" He asked as he picked my hand up as if it were as delicate as a china doll.

"Oh," I tried to play it cool. "It's nothing. Just snagged it on something in my bag."

Thoughts of Billy's gentle bruised face came to mind. I longed for the simplicity of the moment he bandaged my flesh. No upside down, no school rumours, no creepy dreams. Just me and Billy in that

seemingly infinite moment. My skin against his. I wished for our time together to be endless, like the tides in Billy's ocean eyes. But the tide had left now, taking him away with it.

...

Sorry it's such a short chapter, I just wanted to post something...

**Thank you to everyone who reviewed, favourited and followed!
You guys are great!**

(Question: I've been working on a Steve/OC fic on the side. I haven't posted anything yet though. Anyone interested?)

10. Weed Killer

Finally made it to double digits!

Thank you so much to everyone who followed/faved/reviewed! I love you all!

I know some of you wanted a Billy POV but sadly it's not this chapter. It's coming soon though, so you will get a glimpse into Billy's head eventually.

...

Chapter 10: Weed Killer

'Smile, the worst is yet to come.' – Mikky Ekko, Smile

Monday 26th November 1984

I squint as lights from overhead bounced off of the white walls and glared at me, the bright beams penetrated my retina's. The air in this room was piercing and sterile as if every breath was equal parts oxygen and bleach as it coldly soared through my oesophagus. I hated hospitals.

"So, Clare, what grade are you in?" The doctor asked, his eyes settled onto mine.

"11th." I answered simply as I fiddled with the stitching of the leather seat on which I sat.

He carried on asking questions of that nature, as if he were trying to get to know me. But I knew better. This was just a technique used to lull the patients into feeling safe, a way of making sure that the patient was comfortable enough to divulge anything that was wrong with them even if the patient was embarrassed about it.

"Let's talk about why you're here today," He began, voice deepening as if he were done with the small talk. "I've read your file, and I just wondered why you wanted to see me rather than Dr Holmes."

"Oh, well, I just don't think I need him right now." I replied. "There's something physically wrong with my body, not my mind."

He nodded for me to continue, his beady black eyes locked onto mine.

"Uh," I must admit; I am quite nervous of telling a forty-odd year-old man about my faulty reproductive system.

"Go ahead, Clare." He gave a reassuring smile. "There's no judgment here."

"I think there's... something wrong with my insides?" The words scrambled out of my mouth, and I wasn't quite sure why the end of it sounded like a question. "My womb. Or my- I don't know."

"What's made you worry?" He asked as he made a note on his clipboard.

"Well, I'm bleeding a lot." I admitted.

"And you're sure it's not your period?" He asked, one eyebrow raised condescendingly.

"No. I'm sure that it's not my period. I would know." I said, sharply, eyes wide. "This is irregular. And it only happens at night. The bleeding doesn't carry on through the day like a normal period would."

"Spotting, then?" He asked as he wrote something down.

"Yeah, I thought it was that." I nodded. "But it's heavy bleeding. It's like when I'm on my period but then it stops for a few days before it happens again."

"Hmm." He carried on taking notes. He paused then, reread his notes while he played with his pen in his right hand.

I had known another doctor with a similar habit.

"How have you been this week, Clare?" He asked as he toyed with the pen situated between thumb, index and middle fingers.

Holmes was quite the character with a slightly hunched frame that always had a white lab coat swathed over him. He was smaller than the average man, but he made up for that in his enthusiasm during our sessions. He had a rounded face and drooping skin that told of many years being pulled by gravity. I thought he could've been hansom as a younger man.

As I got to know him, I learned that his many years were filled with tales of his childhood, his struggles in the war, his wife and his kids. Holmes was a fatherly figure, and I was glad to have been assigned to him and not some other, younger doctor whose only aim was a promotion.

It had been 5 weeks since I was let out of the hospital, and every Wednesday since I was made to come to these sessions. We – doctor Holmes and I – discussed trivial things, typical teenage stuff as well as some pop culture. At first the 'getting to know you' routine had gotten really old really fast but then he had started to let more and more of his personality show. Soon I began to look forward to these sessions that were filled with tales of the war or discussions of the philosophy of The Lord of the Rings or reviews of movies we'd seen separately.

But today's session felt off. There was something in the air that was just unsettling. It set my teeth on edge.

"I've been good." I answered.

"Great." He nodded, thoughtfully. "School's coming up, right?"

It was my turn to nod before I informed him it was two weeks away.

"How are you feeling about that?" He stopped moving his pen between his fingers and positioned it above the paper, readying himself to make notes.

"I'm fine." My forehead creased.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

Was I sure? No. Sometimes I felt as though I crack and break like the mirror she apparently used to open her wrists. Or at least that's what the police report had said she did.

"No thoughts about...?" He trailed off.

No thoughts about Hannah? I just had one less than five seconds ago.

"I still dream about her sometimes." I admit then shrugged. I was never good at lying so I thought that if I fed Holmes at least some of the truth then the lie that I was 'fine' would slip through his fingers like sand. I didn't want to go back to the hospital. I did not want to be the psycho chick anymore. "But it's mostly just that; the dreams. Nothing else."

"You think you'll be 'fine' in school?" He asked, voice stern reminding me of my dad when he was too busy to tell me off properly.

"I'll be fine, Doctor." I replied as I sat back in the chair. "It happened a year ago now. I'm fine."

I didn't know who I was trying to convince; Holmes or myself.

"Clare?" The doctor stopped twiddling his pen between his fingers which freed my eyes so that I could look back to his face. "Could you perhaps be pregnant?"

My eyebrows strung together in confusion.

I remembered in the showers then, how Billy had made me swallow that stuff. And then by the park when I had rubbed him. I pulled my hand from inside his jeans and found that the substance was glistening in what little light there was. None of that stuff had ever come close to my entrance. I inwardly shuddered at the thought, though in lustful anticipation or fear filled dread I was not sure.

"It's quite common for pregnant women to spot, though if the bleeding is quite extensive then unfortunately you might have implantation bleedin"-

I held my hand up for him to stop. His long and finely wrinkled face took on a sour edge at me interruption.

*"No." I shook my head. "I am *not* pregnant."*

"Okay then." He crossed something out on his clipboard. He looked down at it with an injured expression, then he looked back up at me as if I was the cause of making his notes look messy. "We can schedule a Pap test if you'd like. It's a cervical screening."

"What's that?" I asked.

"An ultra-sound." He supplied.

"An ultra-sound?" I sat up in my seat. "But I just told you I wasn't pregnant."

"It's a precaution. In case of infection or any other..." He said before he took a deep breath and held it for several seconds. He released it and resumed speaking. "...oddities."

"Oddities?" I repeated, dumbly.

He ignored me and carried on scribbling away on his clipboard.

"Have you cut yourself on the inside perhaps?"

I shook my head.

"Any dryness?"

I shook my head again.

"Stress?"

I nodded. He made a note.

"Are you sexually active?" He said as he looked me in the eyes. It took everything I had not to look away in discomfort.

"I'm n-not pregnant." I stuttered out whilst my head shook as if to shake the very thought of being pregnant with Billy as the father.

"Yes, you've said that." He waved his writing hand lightly with the pen between his fingers as if he was somehow crossing out what I had said as it travelled through the air. "But I must be sure. I'm the doctor, yes?"

I nodded. I wondered if what me and Billy had done together counted but we hadn't actually had sex yet (*yet?*), so I guessed that I wasn't 'sexually active'. I refused to let him see just how embarrassed I was, but my traitorous cheeks gave me away as they began to redden.

"No." I answered. "I'm not... active."

"Well, if you're not, I don't think there is much seriously wrong with you. I'll leave it up to a gynaecologist to decide whether you have the ultra-sound or not."

"Why am I bleeding then?" I asked.

"Don't worry." He ignored me. "I'm sure you're fine. I'll refer you to a gynaecologist, how's that sound." He asked, though it seemed he didn't care for my answer.

...

Steve wasn't picking up.

Once I had fled the too crisp building, I made my way over to the payphone, and dialled our home number. I received no response. For a few seconds of dread, I pictured him in a car crash on his way back from dropping me off. His shiny car crushed with him inside flashed behind my eyelids briefly. The rational part of me knew that he'd probably just fallen asleep up in his bedroom and he wasn't able to hear the phone ringing.

I took deep calming breaths. Well, they were supposed to be calming but the cold air did nothing but make my chest burn.

I was down to my last dime. I tried to figure out who I could call who owned and drove a car. There was obviously Hargrove... but I didn't know his home number – not like I'd call the asshole anyway.

I thought of others then. There was Taylor or Hopper – who was most definitely busy – or there was...

My fingers rose to type in the number as I recalled the perfect person.

...

His beat up, rusted Ford parked next to me onto the side of the rode. I smiled at him through the window before I opened the door and climbed in.

"Hi!" I smiled at him and he returned my expression somewhat timidly as I buckled my seat belt. "Thanks so much for picking me up. I owe you one."

"Don't worry about it." Jonathan said, his voice steady as he drove out of the parking lot.

"I can't believe Steve didn't pick up the phone." I said to him, trying to start conversation. "I hope he's okay."

"He's probably fine." Jonathan said. He was always good at calming others and resolving conflicts, so I guessed he was a lot like his mom in that respect.

"Yeah, he probably just fell asleep." I chuckled. "Typical Steve."

Jonathan smiled wider. I wondered what it would take to get him to laugh. I always used to when we were kids, but now he'd hardened. It was only a natural result of the verbal abuse from Lonnie, then the divorce, then Will and the upside down.

I could've gone down the same quiet and stoic path as Jonathan did after Hannah but for some reason I had found a way to cope by burying the sadness, the guilt, the confusion, the anger under a pile of school work and movies and books. I did anything to hide what I felt – and in a lot of ways, I still did. It had only been three years now since Hannah, but the effects of her... death... still lingered. It was a part of me now and it would never leave, I could only make room for it or let it eat me from the inside. I know which option I preferred.

"How's Joyce and Will?" I asked.

Jonathan responded, telling me of the movie night they had had. They had watched Jaws, a favourite of both Will and Jonathan's. It was nice seeing Jonathan content and I knew that Nancy had something to do with that.

"So, how's Nancy?" I asked with a coy smile before I wiggled my eyebrows at him.

His eyes lit up and a smirk tugged at the corners of his lips.

"She's good." He answered as he nodded slowly.

"How's Hargrove?" He threw the question my way as an equally coy smirk found its way onto his face.

"I wouldn't know." I fiddled with my chipped nail polish.

"Any trouble between you guys?" He went from coy and playful to serious and protective in an instant.

"No." I shook my head as my eyes watched the world outside the window. "We're just not... I don't really want to be around him anymore."

"Good." He said as his focus returned to the road ahead. I tried to ignore the jab of an insult when he said it was 'good' that Billy and I weren't close anymore.

I questioned why Jonathan would find that 'good'. Why was it a 'good' thing that I was hurting? Why was it 'good' to be away from someone I cared for? No – *don't Clare, just forget about him. Don't carry on caring about him*, I told myself.

I wish I had a switch on my back that controlled whether I felt emotion or not. It would be so easy to just not feel anymore. It would be so easy to stop caring for him but caring about people was much like a weed, it would never go away, and it would continue to grow alongside all the other treasures in the garden. To kill the weed wasn't simple but it had to be done. It must be done lest I let Billy continue to grow inside me, fill me with thoughts and daydreams of being content with life. Content like Jonathan was with Nancy.

I had to let go of those daydreams. I had to stay away from Billy Hargrove. As I made the decision to keep my distance, a part of me felt as though it were painfully falling away from my grasp, but I was paralyzed, powerless to stop it.

"Nancy told me she has an open day at a college tomorrow." Jonathan informed me.

"Oh, is that the thing Steve is going to?" I asked.

"Yeah, she told me Steve's driving her there." He nodded. "I can give you a ride to school and back tomorrow if you want."

"Yeah, please." I nodded quickly. I was going to walk but if he's offering, I thought that it best that I say yes.

"There's a catch though." He said as he glanced at me.

"Oh?" My eyebrows raised of their own accord.

"I have to drive Will and Dustin too."

"I get Will being there, but why Dustin?" I asked. I liked Dustin, I even thought he was cute but like most people in the end of the world gang, he was crazy.

"Steve said something about him having to bring heavy equipment in for a science fair project, so he needed a ride."

"Your brother and his friends are... kind of weird, yeah?" I looked to him.

"Hell yeah." He chuckled.

We pulled into my drive way then, up behind Steve's untouched polished car. There was something else parked there too, a chunky white van with cursive letters printed onto its side that read 'Paulette's Plumbing'. That's probably why he didn't pick up earlier; something must have gone wrong with the plumbing.

"You having trouble with your plumbing?" Jonathan asked as he looked up at the van through his windshield with wrinkled brows.

"If we are, I wasn't aware of it." I said, eyebrows drawn together. "Thanks for the ride. I'll, uh, see you tomorrow, Jonathan." I said as I climbed out the car, my eyes focused on the van.

Once inside the house, Jonathan pulled away, his tires kicked up swirling dust as they rolled further from the house.

"Steve?" I called as I dropped my bag by the doorway. I called his name a once more and received nothing but silence. I walked to the

each of the bathrooms of the house, hoping to find a Steve and a plumber.

I travelled to the bathroom by the living room. No Steve, no plumber. I journeyed upstairs to Steve's bathroom, then my parents, then mine. No one was here. It seemed the house was empty.

I sat down onto the lid of my toilet and looked out the window. Through the lace curtain I saw movement from outside. I pulled aside the curtain and found Steve walking with a man in blue overalls; the mysterious plumber. Steve was wearing his green knee-high wellingtons and holding a pink floral wooden box to his chest, which was a peculiar sight. He was talking to the man, before Steve nodded. Then the plumber waddled away, tool box in hand, leaving Steve alone with only the pink box as his company.

I jumped up, and with determined steps made my way to the back door. Before I could exit it, a gathering of boxes by the open basement door caught my eyes. I could hear a faint trickling noise coming from the basement.

Steve opened the back door and it softly clanged into the boxes.

"Clare?" I heard him say before he set the pink box down next to other boxes, all differing in sizes and materials.

"Steve?" I raised my eyebrows.

"Oh crap! I was meant to pick you up." He cursed before shutting the back door.

I nodded before I asked what was up with all the boxes and the plumber

"The pipes burst." He answered.

The pipes burst. All I could think about in that moment the pipes leaking red.

"Come see," Steve gestured for me to follow as he disappeared through the black basement door.

I followed him and began the decent into the basement, the stairs creaked as I went, and the further I got, the more the trickling sound grew. I felt my feet carry me down to the last step where I was greeted by the sight of water pouring steadily out of a hole in the pipes. I looked down and found that the murky water was about 3 or 4 inches deep. Like in my dream, the water had spread, but I found solace in the fact that it wasn't *red*.

The basement was dark, light from the single window reflected off the water. Steve was stood in the middle of the room, in the centre of the chaotic space, hands on his hips as he shook his head at the offending pipe.

"I completely understand why you didn't pick me up." I murmured from my place on the step, as I watched the water spray out.

Steve walked over to where piles of boxes lay in disarray. Some of the cardboard ones were wrecked, and I held no hope for their survival. He picked up a rounded grey metal box, the size and shape of a car tier, and trod over to me. Each step splashed and made waves that rippled out from where he placed his foot.

"Will you take this upstairs, please?" Steve asked. "I'm trying to get the boxes out. I don't want mom or dad to be pissed if anything gets damaged."

I didn't say anything, too stunned to really process what was happening, as I took the box from his outstretched hands and carried it up to where the others sat. I placed it next to a damp cardboard box before descending into the basement once again.

My dream and the pipes bursting were just a freaky coincidence. So were the nightmares and waking up to bloody sheets. My middle name was coincidence.

I carried several more boxes upstairs, each of the them wet or damp. Each of them heavy. *There's still a ton of boxes down there*, I thought with a grimace. My red cheeks were proof that I was out of shape.

I descended once more and waited for Steve to bring the next box over.

"Hey," Steve said. "I think this is yours."

"What?" I asked, eyebrows drawn together.

"Yeah, 'C.H.'" He nodded. "It's got your initials on it, see." He held it up for inspection. My heart dropped, a victim of gravity, as my eyes took in the sight of that familiar box.

It was the box from my nightmares.

...

Whenever I write about the box, I think of Brad Pitt's most infamous line; "WHAT'S IN THE BOX?" I mean, I know what's in Clare's box but you guys don't *evil cackle*

I'm sorry for the lack of Billy but I hope you all enjoyed it anyway!

Please drop a review if you have the time Reviews/favs/follows really do motivate me. And I love private messaging you all back when you review. It's cool to know what you liked/disliked about the story.

The Steve/OC fic is definitely a thing now, but I'm going to try to write most of it first before posting anything.

See you next time!

11. I Care Too

Hey everyone! I'm so sorry for this taking so long. It just took forever to write. Just as I thought I was done, I'd end up adding another thousand words... also, I've got quite a bit of work at Uni to do right now so it's been intense.

I'm so thankful to everyone who took the time to review! We're nearly at 80 now! Your reviews honestly make me so happy... thank you. And thank you everyone who faved or followed! I appreciate every one of you guys :)

The chapter is probably littered with mistakes... but I hope you all enjoy anyway!

...

Chapter 11: I Care Too

'Can I make it right? Can I spend the night?' Angie Hart - Blue

...

June 1977

Georgia

"Careful, Georgie." My brother said before tugging playfully on one of my pig tails as he walked past. I was climbing on the sofa, balancing on the edge of the arm. Daddy said I had perfect balance for my age.

"Don't touch my hair!" I slapped his hand away. "Mommy just did it for me. And I haven't shown Daddy yet so don't you mess it up!"

"Okaayy." He crossed his arms and did his best to look like our daddy when he was mad with us. He even tightened his lips and scowled like him. I tried not to laugh at his imitation.

"Hey, will you take me to well later?" I asked. Mommy told me that sometimes there were fairies there. I wanted to catch a fairy and see if they really had sparkly wings like in my picture books.

"It's too far into the woods." He complained, forehead wrinkling as he sat down on the sofa next to where I was balancing.

"But I want to make a wish!" I whined. "Mommy said there'd be fairies there too!"

"Fairies aren't real, pea-brain." He told me as he looked up, irritation plainly written on his face as his forehead wrinkled even more than it already had been.

My eyes widened at him, annoyed that he'd said that. Fairies were real, Mommy had said so.

"If you don't take me then I'll tell Daddy you weren't being nice to me." I said the last half in a sing-song voice as I lowered myself to sit on the arm of the sofa.

"You're the most annoying sister ever!" He exclaimed.

"I know you are, but what am I?" I smiled.

"A pea-brain." He answered, exasperated.

"Will you take me then?" I asked.

"Fine." He scowled. "Go get your shoes on."

"Thanks, Billy!" I said, wrapping my arms around his neck and squeezing before I ran off to get my shoes.

...

Tuesday 27th November 1984

Billy

I saw them together. Her and that loner kid. I scowled as my eyes caught site of her climbing out of his beat-up Ford. She didn't even notice me watching her from my place against my car. She was too absorbed by the guy who had driven her, Zombie boy and that curly haired kid to school. She smiled and laughed with all three of them before they paired off, waved and separated. The younger two

headed off in the direction Max had gone a few minutes ago, leaving her and that guy by themselves.

I flicked my cigarette from between my fingers, started in their direction as they headed into the building. Once inside the too crisp and shiny white hallway, they stopped and talked while I was still pushing my way past other hicks. I saw them part, the loner guy taking a left while she went right. I followed her around the corner and realised she was headed for her locker. I knew that on the way to her locker, stood the white door which led to the girls' bathroom and knowing that she wouldn't talk about that dickhead out in the open with me for fear of gossiping cows, I knew I needed to get her there, so we could be alone. She would talk to me if we were alone. But I knew she wouldn't go with me willingly.

When I was sure no one's attentions were on us, I slipped my hand onto her mouth, the other slid around her petite waist before I pulled her backward and into the bathroom. She struggled against me, and I gathered that she must have realised that it was me who had kidnapped her. Once in the bathroom, I shut the door firmly, pressing my back to it and waiting to hear the click before I moved onto checking the individual stalls. None were occupied. I moved back around to her, putting myself between her form and the exit.

"What the fuck do you want, Hargrove?" She asked with raised hands.

What do I want? I want to not care. *I don't care*, I told myself. I just want to fuck her, leave her so that this fucking feeling would go away. This fucking feeling that ate me up inside and twisted my gut as if it were a knife that was lodged there. Then, I see her and the feeling either grows or fades away. It pissed me off that she could both extinguish my flames and stoke them at the same time. I looked away from her so that I could clear my head of thoughts of what she does to me, and my eyes caught blue in the mirror. It was an angry blue, full of storms and lighting. I hated that I had *his* eyes.

"Why was he talking to you?" I questioned, needing to find out why she was with him. *You need to find out why she was with that guy and not you*, the voice whispered. I told it to fuck off. No one tells me what to do. *Apart from him*, it taunted.

"Who?" She asked as if she were innocent. Oblivious. She was fucking with me, she had to be.

"Zombie boy's older brother." I said as I felt a scowl slide onto my face. It felt so natural now; to always be angry. I had used Tommy's nickname for the kid Max hung around sometimes. That kid, 'Zombie boy', was the younger brother of the loner guy that had stolen King Steve's girl from right under his nose. Though I guess that's what I was doing too; stealing the Princess from her big brother's protection, or at least that's what I was trying to.

"Don't call him that!" She whined, voice high. Her bitchy attitude normally led us to argue, but that turned me on even more. "His name is *Will*. And he's a friend of Max's by the way."

"Jesus, I don't give a shit." I dismissed her, as I shrugged and shook my head in disbelief. Did she actually think I cared about Maxine's band of freaks? *I don't care*, my mind said.

She rolled her eyes.

I couldn't help but think of how... *cute* she looked when she was mad, like a lion cub trying to roar but failing miserably. Her forehead creased, and her plump lips pouted. Her brown eyes lit a fire in my stomach that trailed and burnt along my organs like smoke from my cigs. Her Bambi browns focused on me, tempted me, dared me. But dared me to do what? To speak, to touch her, to make her mine?

I looked away from her eyes and focused them on her hand, the one I bandaged. It no longer had the bandage on it, but I knew the cut must still have been there, thin and scabbed over, not yet healed.

"The older one," I carried on, turning my face back to hers.

"Jonathan." She said before her head bobbed. It took everything in me to fight against thoughts and sounds of her bobbing her head up and down as she sucked me down the ridges of her slick mouth and tight throat. I tried not to think of her doing that with 'Jonathan'. My fists clenched. *She's yours*, the voice purred, and it sounded like a promise.

"Why were you talking to him?" I focus my eyes on her, the blue probably lit with anger or lust or both. I wasn't sure, but I didn't care.

"It's not like it's any of your business." She smirks. It was a good one, one that she no doubt learnt from me. But behind the smirk, I could see something that was caught in her eyes. Something that made her eyes liquify against the concrete that was there during our conversation. Before I could work out what it was I had to remind myself that I didn't care.

I don't care.

But what if you do? the voice asked.

I told it to *fuck off*.

"It's not. Its- it's- weird, is all." I struggled for words – uncommon for me. "He stole your brother's girl... and you still hang out with him?"

"Is that what this is about then?" She asked, eyebrows raised. "You think he's going to steal me away from you?" A cruel laugh left her pink lips. "There's no chance *at all* of that happening, even if Nancy wasn't in the picture. And anyway, I'm not *your girl*. He can't steal me away if I'm not with anyone."

I looked at her then, my jaw clenched. I knew that she **wasn't mine**. Not officially or any bullshit like that *but* we had done stuff. Nearly fucked twice now. Christ, she must be the only girl in town who'd wait this long before letting me fuck her. And once I did fuck her, she'd be mine. I'd be her first, a permanent stain on the Princess' virtue. And then I'd leave her, and the stupid fucked up, gut wrenching, heart pounding feeling (that I knew was her fault) behind. It would be left in the dust my car kicked up as it sped past. I'd leave it behind like California. Like my friends. Like my mom who was planted in the ground, a flower that would never grow and see light ever again.

"Why're you asking, anyway? I thought you didn't care." She questioned, malice thickly dripping from her parted lips. "You don't care about anything."

She smirked. She was too damn right; I didn't care about shit. I didn't give a shit about this goddamn hick town, or Neil, or Susan, or that mutt that was stupid enough to get run over, or Max. Or Clare. Or mom. Or Georgie...

I don't care.

I was stuck in my thoughts, too busy to notice that the Princess had knocked into my shoulder as she went for the exit.

As I turned to her, intending on pulling her back to me and showing her just how much I didn't care, the door moved. It inched open, as if time was slowing. If it were a teacher, there would be detention for the both of us. Neil wouldn't like that; his fuck up of a son getting another detention. It meant that he or Susan would have to pick Max up. It meant that he'd have to teach his son another lesson with his fists, the only lessons I had ever gotten from him.

Before I allowed the door to open anymore and reveal us, I put my hands on her wide hips and dragged her backward into one of the stalls. I twisted the lock on the door, locked us into the tight space. A few sets of footsteps sounded in the near empty room, the clattering of their heels echoing off the tile walls.

Between the slit of the door and its frame I saw three girls walk in, each in similar preppy outfits that featured drab tartan patterns and a long skirt. It used to be that whenever I saw girls covered up like that, thoughts of golden Cali girl legs in miniskirts would dance into my head and I'd instantly feel sick about being so far from home. But now, something weird had happened. I compared each of the girls to the Princess. I thought of how their hair wasn't the right shade of brown, nor were they as pale as her, nor did they wear nude tights under knee length floral dresses that teased me when the wind blew.

These girls were insignificant.

They walked and talked before coming to stop in front the mirrors. They primped and primed their hair (that I thought was probably way too big and had a ton of product in) and added gloss to already plastic looking lips and adjusted their white tights while still talking to each other about girl shit.

"They're together?!" One of the bitches squealed. She broke the silence. Clare's eyes flew open and landed on mine.

"Betty told me." One said, and Clare's pink cheeks seemed to pale.

"I still can't believe it!" One giggled. "That Hargrove of all people would go with a freak like her."

Clare's eyes trailed downward and settled onto my chest.

"Clare's not *that* freaky anymore." One weakly defended her.

Clare's eyelids shut, restricting my view of the fresh pain and humiliation in her eyes. I hated them. Fucking skanks talking about her as if they knew anything. They didn't know shit. A voice whispered that I should *touch* Clare, hold her hand or smooth her back. But I couldn't do it. My fingers twitched, unsure of whether they should hold her hand or punch something.

"Yeah, but... still." Another replied. "Hargrove is totally out of her league."

"Agreed." The curt reply came.

The bitches chatted for a moment longer before their clumsy feet began to walk to the door. They exited, and the door shut behind them, clicking into place as it left silence in its wake as if it were a switch shutting off all sound.

Clare inhaled in a long shaky breath. She squeezed passed me, unlocked the door and headed swiftly toward the exit. I went after her, grasped onto her wrist and didn't let go. I didn't want to let go.

"Clare, wait." I said.

"Just leave me alone." She refused to meet my eyes.

"No." I said. Our eyes in the mirror caught each other and neither of us look away.

She huffed.

"Those girls were bitches." I said.

"...Yeah, I know." She murmured.

"What they were saying though..." I paused as I watched her unchanging expression like a sailor looking for storms. "It's not true. Like you said: we're not together."

Her eyes closed.

"I know." She said. I felt something in me tear as I watched the tiny crease between her brows deepen.

"Then why're you so pissed?" I asked.

"Because I want it to be true!" Her eyes opened, and instantly locked onto mine in the reflection. "Is it so hard to believe that some gullible *freak* like me would want to be happy with someone? And we've done stuff together. Fooled around or whatever it's called and I- can I really be blamed for wanting more? That stuff, like what we did in the showers, meant something to me. But I guess you don't feel the same way. You don't care."

I don't want to care. That feeling I talked about earlier came back and hit me right in the gut, harder and more intense than any hit from Neil could ever be. I wanted it to go away. If I just stopped caring, it would go away.

"You think I don't care?"

"I know you don't." She looked away from my reflection so that she could look at the real thing. Brown met blue. I saw in the rawness of her eyes that there was something else there too.

I was struck dumb by her eyes. Thoughts of my mom's own brown eyes pleading with my dad. Clare and her, they would've have gotten along.

I had swallow down those thoughts. She was gone now. It was my fault.

I remembered the first time he'd hit me. I'd been crying over mom – it

was just a week after her funeral. He'd heard me, came into my room and slapped me. He told me it was my fault she was dead. It was my fault and I didn't deserve to care.

"You're right." I said harshly with my upper lip raised. Her eyes were like a reflection of my mom's and I didn't want to be reminded of the guilt. I leant done to her level, came close to her face for my next words. "I don't."

Clare's lip gave a little tremble. I tightened my jaw, roughly let her wrist go and took a step back. Clare's eyes glossed over. I restricted myself from stepping toward her again and holding her and telling her that I want to care. *But I can't. I can't do it and I don't know why.*

"Billy," She whimpered. "Just go."

She wanted me gone. Like Max and Neil and Susan. It would be so much easier for them if I weren't in their lives to fuck anything up. Now Clare wanted me gone too.

So, I left. I turned my back on her as silver streams trailed down her smooth cheeks.

...

"I care about you."

Her voice whispered like wind through buildings. Like secrets through parted red lips. Like moans through clenched teeth.

I leant on my car, cigarette between my lips as I waited for Max to hurry up and finish in the arcade. Her and her weirdo pals were in there, the video games their only chance at escape from their boring Hawkins lives.

I was transfixed by the smoke that drifted from the end of my cigarette and travelling up into the night. I was disturbed by the rumble of a car which was pulling up behind mine. It was Harrington's, who no doubt was taking the kids, bar Max, home. It was weird: Harrington being friends with middle school kids. It was *creepy* even, but I'd seen worse back in California.

Harrington slammed his door shut before he trod over to me, a grim expression marred his face. I noticed his forehead crease in the same places the Princess's did when she was pissed.

"This yours?" Harrington asked, holding a denim jacket in one clenched fist. I nearly told him to 'fuck off' but then I looked to the jacket. It was mine. It was the one I'd wrapped around the Princess's shoulders the other night. I realised that he must have figured out that the Princess and I were more than just lab partners. But that's what I wanted. I wanted him to know and be angry and take it out on me.

The first time I saw her, I thought a quick fuck would've been nice. But then, to find out that she was Harrington's sister was *gold*. A quick fuck *and* a chance at Harrington being blindingly mad when he found out. He'd be mad enough to start throwing punches. Oh, how I would've revelled at the feel of his skin breaking beneath my knuckles.

"Yeah, it is." I nodded once, deciding that I wanted to taunt him. "Did the Princess say I could have it back?"

He pushed the jacket into my chest and held it there whilst he stepped closer, intent on me hearing his next words.

"Stay away from her." His voice was low. It didn't remind me of my dad at all.

I scoffed as he stepped back, letting the jacket go. My hands came up to grab the denim before it fell to the ground.

"Look at you!" I taunted. "Playing the big brother."

"I'm not 'playing' anything, asshole." He said, eyes alight with fury. "Don't go near her again."

"Jesus, man. Fine." I held my free hand up in surrender. "I'll leave her alone..."

He simply glared at me, obviously unconvinced.

"I mean- if *she* comes to *me*, then it's fair game."

"It isn't shit, Hargrove." He said. "Stay away from her."

I'm distantly aware of the irony in this situation. Not two months ago, I'd been the big brother saying that to the kid Maxine was hanging around with. Now Max and Sinclair were always together. Speaking of the brats, they all flooded out of the arcade. There was Max, Sinclair, the Wheeler kid, some chick with short hair, 'Zombie boy' and the curly haired one. They all looked between us before they settled accusing eyes onto me. Max furrowed her brow.

"Just stay away." Harrington commands like the king he used to be. "She's been through some tough shit the last few years. She doesn't need some asshole messing with her."

"Woah, Steve." The curly headed kid said cautiously as he looked between both of us. "What's going on?"

"Billy?" Max asked, though I was unsure of what she was asking. Was she accusing me? Was she asking about what was going on? Was she shocked? Scared?

"Get in the car, Max." I said as I climbed in.

I drove away as soon as Max had shut the door. The engine roared as we left the gang of freaks in a cloud of Hick town dust. I ignored the worried glances that Max sent my way. I ignored her when she asked about why Steve was mad. I ignored her when she told me about her and her friends putting up lost posters for the dog. I ignored her when she asked about the Princess. When she said her name, I tried so hard to not shout at Max or hurt her. I just focused on the purr of the engine and the feeling of it roar as my temper flared.

"I care about you." The voice rattled in my head.

'I don't care,' was the response I gave.

...

28th Wednesday November

Basketball centred me. It bruised. It was fast. It took skill. I bruised. I was fast. I was skilled. Basketball was *my* sport. It was what I was

good at. More than good.

That's why I was pissed off: I had missed the shot. Twice now. Harrington had smirked at me when the ball rebounded off the hoop and bounced along the ground. It had taken everything I had not to walk over and punch his gut, knock his legs out from under him, break his nose.

"What's up with you today, Hargrove?" Coach called.

"Nothing, Coach." I called back.

"You seem like you're miles away." He complained, shaking his head.

I simply shook my head back and shrugged. I told myself that I wasn't distracted by the girls' gym class that was on the other end of the gymnasium. *She* was there, in her tight little cheer uniform complete with matching poms-poms, but her short skirt wasn't the only reason I was so messed in the head.

Coach looked at me sternly before turning to the guys who were currently wrestling over the ball. I walked to the edge of the court where I had left my water bottle. I picked it up and took a swig. The water made my throat drier.

"Hey, Billy!" I rolled my eyes as a voice accompanied by clumsy footfalls came from behind me. "You okay, man?" Tommy asked, as he stood next to me.

"Yeah." I said, shortly.

"You sure?" He asked. Why couldn't he just fuck off already?

"Yes." I said. "Are you done?"

"Yeah, man." He looked as if he were a dog that I had just kicked. Though what I had said and how I had said it didn't deter him from speaking again. "Uh, you pulling?"

I looked over to him, scowl set on my face. He watched – no, salivated – over the girls on the other side of the hall. I huffed as my eyes rolled.

"No." I said. I didn't try to look for her on the other side of the room.

"That's not what I heard." He said as the sad dog-look on his face had vanished and left behind a smug know-it-all expression.

I answered by glaring at him.

"I heard you had a thing for the crazies." He smiled at me.

"What?" I said, shoulders rigid.

"Steve's sister." He said, smugly. "She went crazy after her slut friend offed herself. It's a shame, really. They were both fuckable."

I stared at him, not speaking. My fingers started to twitch.

"You're doing her, right?" He asked.

He was staring over at the other side of the gym. He ran his eyes over the girls. Over her.

"She's crazy. But I reckon she'd let me, right? She must be easy."

I balled my fists.

"The crazy ones must be wild in the sack. I can just imagine her on her knees. Her pretty lips wrapped around my-"

I went blind.

I pushed him down. I straddled him. I punched into his dumb face over and over. Arms pulled me from him, but I resisted. I punched him once last sweet time before I was yanked away. There were voices calling. I heard the squeak of sneakers against the floor. People gathered around us. Tommy rose to try and come at me, but others held him back.

I still tried to get at him when I heard the person who was holding me back speak.

"Stop." Harrington said. I turned around to make sure it was really him. It *was* him. Why was he, of all people, trying to stop me from

fighting? I would've thought he would've liked to see me in deep shit for beating on Tommy.

I stilled, and he figured that I had stopped trying to get out of his grip. I felt his arms drop from around me. I looked down at my shaking hands and twitching fingers. They were red, a mixture of both mine and Tommy's blood painting the surface. My eyes trailed upward and landed on brown. Her eyes were honeyed from the sunlight dripping in through the windows.

She was looking right at me. A pain and disappointment leaking from her eyes, or was she just crying? I knew she was crying because of *me*. Because of what *I* had done. It wasn't the first time I had made her cry. I remembered her tears when I had made her cum, and how she had cried in my car, and then how silver streams had caught the light in the bathroom yesterday.

It's your fault.

I took a step backward. I didn't want to feel her pain, her sorrow. My stomach turned as I realised she made me feel shame for what I had done.

I was jerked out of my thoughts by Coach who roughly grabbed onto my upper arm and started pulling me away. He yelled at the others. I can't remember what he said, I just know he was angry. He took me to the principal's office, sat me down, called my dad. I knew what was next. I knew I'd get a beating tonight. No one would think twice about the bruises; they'd think that Tommy must've gotten in a jab at me. Somehow, I was okay with that. I knew Neil would hit me, but I deserved it for making Clare's eyes look that way. I deserved every slap, kick, punch that he would throw my way for making Clare hurt.

My chest constricted as if Neil were already here, pounding on me as I realised that maybe I *did* care.

...

As soon as my dad had shown up, he'd been brought in by the principal and his secretary. They'd sat and discussed my behaviour at home and at school, as if I weren't even in the room. I remembered

the phrase 'troubled boy' being brought up by the principal before he handed a blue leaflet with the words '10 Tips for Troubled Teens' written at the top. I rolled my eyes at the thought of my dad ever reading a single word of it beyond the title.

The car ride home was silent. We'd left my car in the parking lot. Dad didn't trust me to drive it home by myself.

We made it home. Nothing happened. I got an ice pack for my hands. The kitchen faucet dripped. Dad told me to go to my room, so I did.

I sat on my bed and starred up at the ceiling for a few thoughtless moments. All I could hear was his heavy footfalls in the living room. He was pacing. Each step was as expected as the drip that came from the faucet. I placed the ice on my throbbing fingers and held in my hiss with ease when the cold met a wound. I shook my head at myself, thinking that they'd only just healed from beating up Harrington a few weeks ago. Most of the cuts had reopened. Maybe some would leave silver scars which would mar my skin until years passed and they faded a little.

I felt my chest tighten. It had gone quiet. *The calm before the storm*, I thought, with a shake of my head. Or was I in the eye of the storm as I suspected I'd been in for most of my life now?

Then my thoughts stopped. There weren't any cars outside nor any wind to rustle the leaves on the ground under my window. There was no pacing, no faucet dripping. It was silent. *The calm before the sto-*

"Billy!" Neil shouted from down the hall.

I stood up with wide eyes. I dropped the ice pack on the bed as I waited for him. I heard him marching toward my room, firm steps a distant echo of his earlier pacing.

My door opened, and Neil trod in. He walked a few steps forward before planting his feet in the centre of the room, only a few feet from where I stood. He starred at me with hollow blue eyes. Mom used to tell me I had the same eyes as him. I hated that she was right.

"Why are you like this, Billy?" He asked, but I knew he didn't want an

answer.

"I don't know, dad." I said.

"You don't know?" He scoffed.

"No," I began. "Why don't *you* tell me?"

He rubbed his jaw.

"What was that fight over, huh?" He questioned.

"It was nothing." I shrugged.

"Nothing'?" He crossed his arms. "Then why are we are we here right now? I am missing work because of you, Billy. Tell me why you started the fight."

"I don't know." I blinked a few times. "It was just some asshole who wouldn't shut up."

"And before the fight? That incident with your teacher. What happened then, Billy?"

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. He'd brought up the detention I'd gotten last week, the detention that led to me staying in school even after detention had ended. It was worth it though; time alone in school to just mess around playing basketball by myself. I'd gone to the locker room afterward, needing a shower. I'd never had a more welcome surprise than finding the Princess under the spray, naked, waiting, wet and soft.

"Billy," My dad's voice yanked me from Clare and harshly threw me back into my room. "Tell me."

"I talked back to her." My voice rasped.

"Who?" He asked.

"Mrs Anderson." I said. I didn't understand his need for titles and shit. Like how he insisted on me calling him 'Sir'. It gave me an adrenaline rush to ignore this rule sometimes. But I would never step much

further over the line than that, unless I *wanted* to be punished.

"And then you walked out of her class." He uncrossed his arms. "Your principle was telling me it wasn't the first time you did that. Do you skip school often?"

I shrugged.

"Billy." He growled.

I paused before I answered with a nod.

He took a deep breath. I saw the movement of his chest as the air went in and out.

"What did we talk about?" He asked, voice lowering. "That night that you were supposed to bring Max back?"

He stepped toward me.

"We talked about..." I started.

"Well?" He said.

I knew I'd get in a shit ton of trouble for this;

"We talked about where Max was... And I told you that Max didn't need a babysitter. I said she was too old for one."

My back crashed into my wall, knocking the speaker off my side table and onto the window frame. I could feel my heart beating against the yellowed walls as Neil's hands pinned me there.

"What did we talk about?" He growled.

I didn't respond. He'd hit me, I knew he would. I thought of the look in Clare's eyes earlier and I knew I deserved this.

"I told you Max wasn't my sister." I stared at him. Max wasn't my sister. Georgia was.

The resounding crack went through the air like thunder. The side of my face tingled as if electrocuted.

"Respect and responsibility, Billy." He growled.

He grasped onto my chin, forcing me to look at the dead fire in his eyes.

"Say it."

"Respect and responsibility." I said, voice hoarse.

"When you gave that teacher attitude, were you showing respect?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, sir."

"After you disrespected that teacher, you got a detention. The detention stopped you from picking Max up. Max is your responsibility, yes."

"Yes, sir."

"This fight today... you shirked off your responsibility to your sister by being reckless. Now, Susan will have to pick her up."

My breath caught when he stepped away from me.

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

I hate you. Just kill me already. Kill me or fuck off. That's what I wanted to say, but there's no way in hell I ever would. I knew the routine by now; he wanted me to apologise.

"I'm sorry," I said. I wanted to hit myself for sounding so desperate.

"Sorry'?" He said.

"Yeah." I nodded.

"Yeah'?" He repeated me again, jaw muscles tightening.

"Yes... Yes, sir."

"No." He said, his head slowly moving from left to right once.

It felt as though the entire world had moved on without us, we were stuck in that moment. I was trapped with him, an eternity of his eyes pinning me in place.

"No." He scowled as his head shook. A nasty scowl started to take form on his face.

"No'?" I questioned in as strong a voice as I could muster.

"Not this time, boy." His upper lip raised, a minute flicker of anger that I had learnt over the years to fear. "You don't get to say you're 'sorry' and whimper like a little faggot. You have to learn."

I heard a high-pitched whir in my ears that wouldn't stop.

He thumped my stomach. I almost doubled over but this wasn't new to me, so I was able to plant my feet in time.

"You fuck up." He grunted, as he hit me again with a fist.

He hit me a third time in a new place. I wasn't ready for it, I fell. I was in the foetal position. He kicked a few times, grunting and cursing at me with each stomp of his boot. He kicked harder. Then he stopped. He picked up something from my bed and threw it at me. I grimaced as it hit a sore rib. He left his fuck up of a son on the floor and left the room, closing the door stiffly behind him.

My eyes stung as I realised what he'd thrown at me. It was the ice pack. Thanks, dad.

...

I hadn't bothered to crawl into bed. I just grabbed the pillow and blanket, pulled them under and over me on the hard floor before closing my eyes. I fiddled with my necklace as I listened to the house around me. Dad had probably left to go back to work, Max was still at school, and Susan was at work. It was quiet. I was all alone.

Through my eyelids I could see the day change from light to dark. The next time they opened, my room looked alien to me. All the

furniture had changed under the moonlight. It was as if they had all been draped in dusty grey sheets, that resembled nothing of their former selves. The moon light that streamed in from broken blinds lit up parts of the room which allowed me to piece together where I was. Falling asleep on the floor wasn't the best idea after having the shit kicked out of me.

I struggled to sit up but eventually managed to. I leant against the side table, catching my breath, before deciding to head for the bathroom. The mirror revealed a red chest, with a few old scars scattered about. Luckily, my face was already bruised on the side he'd slapped me, so hopefully it would camouflage any new marks. The marks on my chest wouldn't be easy to cover up. I just hope I play as a shirt next time we play shirts v skins in basketball.

I looked to my clock. 11:03. *Quite a long nap*, the voice was back. *Maybe you should get your head checked. He has hit you on the head before. He did it a lot back in Cali. Why else would you still be here? You've clearly been domed one too many times.*

Shut the fuck up, I dismissed it.

After patching myself up in the bathroom, I'd silently left the house, car keys in hand. I cursed as I remembered that my car was still parked at the school. A twenty-minute walk and I was there. I unlocked the door and sat inside. I didn't notice getting the car keys out of my pocket or starting the car or driving. I wasn't even sure of where I was going.

My car stopped. I realised I was down the road from her house. I lit a cigarette and played with my Zippo for a while.

"Look, you can still stay over if- if things get bad." She'd told me. I held onto my rib. Things had gotten 'bad'. Things were *fucked*, actually.

...

I discovered that, luckily, there were no security lights – or at least not any that were turned on – which meant that I could study each of the windows until I found hers. But the windows were all identical glass squares, plain and unlit, without any variance that could help

me figure out what room was hers. I thought about throwing stones at each of the windows. I could only smirk at the thought of throwing pebbles up to King Steve's window. I settled on going around her house – her mansion – to the back side of it where more windows waited.

Before I could study them, the sight of the pool stopped me in my tracks. Of course, Princess would have a massive pool in her backyard. And there I was, living in a beat up shed of a house on Old Cherry Road. I limped over to the edge of the pool and held onto the rail on the ladder as I looked down at the where the water should've been. I found an inch of water trapped in a curve at the bottom. A few leaves had fallen in and were floating atop the water, making it seem like a miniature swamp.

A gust of frigid air blew over me then, moving and twisting the leaves that sat at the edges of the property. I looked across the empty pool to the tree line. The trees starred at me, both of us silent observers of the other, as they swung in the wind. The branches rubbed and bumped into each other, creating a symphony of rustles.

Who the fuck has a forest in their backyard? This place was like some fairy-tale: a castle with its very own King and Princess, and a swamp sized moat to protect them from the surrounding forest which no doubt housed monsters.

I could've sworn something moved. Just at the edge of the trees. But it was just the wind. Five-year-old Billy, would've sworn it was something alive moving in there and would've ran to mommy, scared and sniffing snot. As seventeen-year-old Billy, I knew that there was only one monster, and he was waiting for me back at home.

I turned and stared up to the second-floor windows. They were the same ones I'd seen from the front, all bland and square, except for one. I smiled up at the window with pink light emanating from within.

A few pebbles later, her already open window opened further, and a princess poked her head out. I straightened up, not wanting her to see how much my ribs hurt. She looked down at me, mouth parted and eyes shining the moonlight.

"Hey." She whispered.

"Hey." I whispered back.

"Why are you here?" I could just about hear her as the whisper drifted down to meet my ears.

"I can still sleepover... right?"

Her eyes ran over me. Her forehead creased and for a moment I was sure she wouldn't let me stay over. She'd want me gone like some stray dog. But we saved a stray dog, I reminded myself. Hell, she was going to take in the dog if those stupid lost posters didn't work.

She nodded.

"Can you climb up?" She asked.

I shook my head.

"Walk to the front door." She told me.

...

The room was cold, yet I shrugged off my leather jacket and held it awkwardly in one hand. She reached for the jacket, took it from me and hung it up in her closet. I wondered if she'd done that the last time she had one of my jackets, which had led to Harrington finding it and returning it to me.

"I can get you some pyjamas, if you want?" She didn't wait for my answer before telling me she'd be back soon.

I was left stood in the centre of her very pink room. The only thing that wasn't pink were her sheets, a crisp white like the kind you'd get in fancy hotels. Her lamp, the walls, curtains and wardrobe on the other hand, they were pink. Even the girl herself was wearing pink silk PJs. Silk. *I guess that's how the other half live.*

I wandered over to her desk (which was also pink) where a small black chest sat next to a photo album. I traced Clare's initials on the chest before fiddling with the golden padlock. It looked as though it

hadn't been opened in a century. Then I turned my attention to the photo album. The first page had a photo of a young girl and boy. The boy was in a dog costume and the girl was in a dress with a big wig on her head. *Scooby Doo and Daphne*, I smiled. The little boy must've been Steve and the girl – I smiled wider – was Clare. The next page was a picture of Clare and another boy. He looked like Zombie Boy – I mean Will, he looked like Will Byers. The boy in the picture must have been Jonathan, the loner guy. Him and Clare both smiled big grins either side of a very pregnant Joyce Byers. Each of them had a spoon, presumably for the tub of Ben and Jerry's knockoff ice cream Joyce was holding. I flipped the page again. It was a photo of a dark-skinned girl in oversized peace sign sun glasses. She was smiling at the camera, the lens flaring from how sunny the setting was. I flipped the page and there she was again, smiling, with her arm wrapped around a younger Clare.

I turned as I heard the door open. She was holding a set of blue and white striped pyjamas, clutching them to her chest as if she were hiding herself from me, protecting herself subconsciously.

"They're my dad's." She said with an awkward tilt of her head. "They should fit you."

"Thanks." I said but I made no move to take them from her.

She sat on the edge of her bed, eyebrows drawn together as her hands clutched the blue PJs. The crease between her brows reminded me of when mom and me would draw pictures of the beach and I would draw little 'V' shaped birds in the distance. She seemed to be mulling things over. *There's still time for her to kick you out*, the voice whispered. My eyes dropped to her pink rug which was the shape of a butterfly.

"You scared me today." She admitted. I looked back up to her, my eyes searching hers. Like I had just predicted; she was afraid. "Fighting Tommy. I mean, I know he's a dick and all, but... you were gone. It was like you weren't you."

But that was me, I wanted to say. But I knew if I said that, we'd end up arguing again. I just wanted to fall asleep, rest my head next to hers, not argue and leave and end up asleep and alone in my car.

I unbuttoned my shirt, aware of her eyes following my bruised and cut hands as I rid myself of it, leaving my upper half naked and at the mercy of her gaze. She examined me, her eyes glossy as a helpless look crossed her face.

"Tommy didn't hit you... I saw them pulling him away before he could..." I watched, helpless as the cogs turned in her head. Raw empathy bled from her eyes as she figured it out.

"He shouldn't do that to you." She said, after a pause.

"Yeah, well he does it anyway."

"Have you ever tried to tell someone?" Her eyes plead. "Like an adult? I know the Chief – he's kind of a friend? – and I know he could help you-"

"No." I shook my head. "No, I'm not telling anyone."

"But-"

"*You're* not telling anyone." I said, voice iron. **No one can know.** "Swear to me."

She swallowed, eyes watering as she warily glanced at my chest and then to her hands which sat clasped together above the PJs on her lap.

"Fine." She shook her head in turbulent submission. "I won't tell."

I felt myself move toward her. Her eyes looked up and rested on my chest. I heard her breath. I could almost feel it against me. It was like at the Halloween Party, when we first talked. She smelt the same as she had then. I remembered how I'd wanted to taste her, find out if she tasted as good as she smelt. I inwardly smirked, cocky that I knew more than my past self. *She tasted better*, the voice agreed with me.

I wanted to taste her again.

Ignoring the pain, I bent down as my hand rose to her chin and tugged it an inch higher so that her eyes would meet mine. I wanted

to see her Bambi-in-the-headlights look, or the look that she had when I was about to kiss her, or the one where her eyes were dilated from what we had done to each other's bodies. She didn't look up at me though. Her brows were still creased. I closed the gap between us and ever so slightly pressed my lips to the crease. I felt the skin smooth out under my lips. My eyes drifted closed.

The kiss was an eternity of warmth.

Reluctantly, I drew back, my eyes hooded as I took in the sight of her lips which were slightly parted, her cheeks pink against the rest of her pale skin, and forehead no longer creased. During the kiss, her eyes had closed. I looked over her face and took in where all the fine creases in her skin were, where each freckle lay, where the tiny oval beauty mark lay flat just off centre on her cheek. I ran my thumb over it, feeling soothed by the silk-like skin I found. She looked as peaceful as I imagined she would if she were asleep.

After an eternity, or several unlit days, her eyes opened.

Her expression told me that she longed to say something, but she bit her lip, choosing to stay silent and not say what so clearly tugged at her mind. I wasn't sure if I was grateful for that or not.

Her delicate hands deftly unfolded the PJs as I sat next to her on the bed, holding my ribs as the bed shifted under my weight. She helped me tug on the shirt, one arm at a time. I left the buttons untied. She stood, then knelt before me, confusing me at first before she grabbed my ankle, meaning to remove my boots.

"You don't have to do that." I complain, only reluctantly pulling my foot from her, but she held on. "I can do it myself."

"Billy," She stopped me. "You can barely bend down. Let me do this for you."

I wanted to tell her that she didn't owe me shit and that I wasn't some kid who needed her help, but her voice trembled into my head; *'I care about you'* she'd told me. *'Let me do this for you.'* I held my tongue and tried not to drown under the sudden weight of her words.

As my boot slid from my foot, and then the other, leaving white ribbed socks behind as the only protection from her cold room, I was reminded of a Bible story my mom used to tell me during bath time. It was the one where Jesus washed his disciples' feet. He washed their feet as easy as God washing away sins. I wondered if Clare would forgive me so easily. I wondered if my mom would. I wondered – if there was even a god – if He would forgive me too.

I studied her as she put my boots and my shirt away. Clare – the Princess – helping me, on such a base level showed that I had been wrong about her. She wasn't some stuck up rich bitch. She was good and kind – the antithesis of myself.

...

We lay together, under cold sheets, eyes focused on the ceiling that looked pink with the light her lamp was giving off. If I moved my hand just an inch to the right my fingers would brush against hers...

"Goodnight." She said, interrupting my church boy level fantasy of touching her hand.

"Night." I said.

My eyes closed. I waited for the bed to shift as she reached over to turn the stupid pink light off, but it didn't happen. All I could see through my eyelids was this fucking oppressive pink. Of all the colours that were oppressive, I never thought *pink* would ever be on that list.

"Are you gonna turn the light off?" I asked, eyes opening and focusing on the ceiling once more.

"Uh, no." She said, voice sounding small as if she were embarrassed.

"Why?" I said, not meaning for my voice to sound as annoyed as it did.

She murmured something. I rolled to my side, facing her and raising my eyebrows. She rolled to face me mirroring the position I was in.

"I don't like the dark." She whispered, her brown eyes huge and black

and pleading. Bambi-in-the-headlights.

"You're scared of the dark?" I asked.

"Wha- No!" She denied as her head shook. "Not scared of it."

"Come here," I pulled her into my arms, holding back the flinch as her skin met fresh bruises.

"Hey." She complained.

I leant over her, ignoring the stiffness of my back, as I turned the light off. The room draped itself in darkness. Clare's form burrowed into mine. My eyes adjusted to the darkness and I saw that hers were clamped shut.

"Relax, scaredy cat." My arms went around her. "I'm here."

I felt her soften against me.

"Don't leave." She whispered as her head ducked into my neck. "Don't go."

"I'm not going anywhere." I said. Was she really this afraid of the dark? "I'm staying all night."

"No, I mean..." I felt her nose press against my collarbone. "After tonight. Don't leave me."

"Oh." I said like an idiot. "Okay. I won't."

"Are you lying?" She asked. "People always lie. And they always leave."

A memory of the fight with Tommy sparked in my brain.

'She went crazy after her slut friend offed herself.' He'd said. I hadn't realised his meaning at the time, I was too busy trying and failing to control the red blurring up my vision.

Clare had lost someone. A friend. And she was still dealing with the aftermath. I tried not to think of my own mother's passing. I tried not

to think about how it was all my fault.

"Clare?" I pressed my lips to her hair, smelling strawberryies.

"Yeah?"

"I won't leave you."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

I care about you.

I care too.

...

Hey guys! Hope you enjoyed it!

This is the longest chapter yet! It's 18 pages long and about 8700 words!

I loved writing from Billy's POV. It was great. I hope he was in character (but I'm not so sure I did a good job with his development).

Just in case any of you watch Game of Thrones: that forehead kiss was inspired by Jon and Sansa at the end of Season 6. The look on Jon's face afterward... I'm sure you can find the scene on YouTube if you're curious.

Drop a review please! Its always the best part of my day.

See you guys next time!

12. If You Go Down to the Woods Today

Crimson Wings has returned!

Sorry for the wait guys! Uni has been crazy, but I've finished all my essays now, so I have time to write this yay!

And woo! We made it passed a hundred reviews! Thanks guys!

Sorry if there's any mistakes.

...

Chapter 12: If You Go Down to the Woods Today...

'When you look in the face of evil, evil's gonna look right back at you.'
American Horror Story Season 2: Asylum

"After tonight. Don't leave me." My nose was pressed against his collarbone, drinking in the scent of his cologne and cigarettes and something else; an intoxicating aroma that was just him.

"Oh." He said. "Okay... I won't."

"Are you lying?" I said. "People always lie. And they always leave."

"Clare?" I felt the purr of his voice as he pressed his lips to my hair.

"Yeah?"

"I won't leave you."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

...

Thursday 29th November 1984

Clare

I woke up hot. Too hot. The sheets suffocated me in their heat. I kicked them off. I needed the cold. I spread out on the bed and was relieved to feel dry sheets. Thank god I hadn't bled with Billy here. My eyes blinked open. Billy was here. I turned, sitting up in the bed as my eyes sought out his form but I came up empty. He wasn't here. Had I dreamt it? When was the last time I had a good dream? Or had he really been here and left me? I swallowed bitter disappointment as my hand hovered over the space he should've been in. I felt none of Billy's heat radiate up to my flesh. I tore my hand away as sickness settled in my stomach.

A whisper came from behind me. I turned to it, thinking it was Billy. But there was no one there. There was only dust dancing in the golden morning sunshine before my window. There was also the desk, stood firm and stoic as the box which sat atop it. In the days I had it in my possession, I hadn't dared open it. *I was just being an idiot*, I told myself, *it was just a box, why shouldn't I open it?* But if I did, I felt like things would change. I felt as though the atmosphere would shift into a reality I wasn't ready for. A reality that was dark and filled with awful, terrible things. It was an object which had belonged in my nightmares and so it had to hold equally nightmarish items within it. So, I resolved not to open it. I would wait for Mom and Dad to return so that I could confront them about why my initials were carved onto the black surface and what was inside the damn thing and why it had a lock on it.

For now, it would remain on the desk, haunting me with its secrets that I was too afraid to unearth.

...

I span the dial of my locker as my temples throbbed. The hallway was crowded, it being just before the end of lunch with everyone making their way to class or stopping here to get their books. Taylor and I had hung around together since her friends were either skipping or too hungover from the party they'd gone to last night.

"Lover boy's still coming to Tina's party, y'know." She said as I opened my locker. "You should come too."

"No, I shouldn't." I said, shoving a science book into my bag. "Not if

he's there."

"Ah, I get it." She said, leaning her weight onto one leg. "Trouble in paradise."

I scoffed. "We were never in paradise."

"So, there is a 'we'." She said, a smile tugging at her lips as though she'd tricked me into saying too much. "Gotta admit, for a second there I thought you were all *virginial* and shit." She grimaced. "But if you're with someone like Billy then..." Her eyes grew wide as she fanned herself.

"Then what?" I said, clueless.

"Then... you guys must've, y'know, *banged*." She said. "There's no way someone like him would stick around if you guys weren't doing that."

I slammed my locker shut, drawing a few glances my way before they back to their own business in the hallway.

"I'm not..." I began, before I glanced around to see if anyone was close enough to overhear.

"Not what?" She said.

"*Fucking* him." I said, voice hushed.

"Oh... 'kay then." She furrowed her brow. "Why not?"

"Is that a trick question?" I said. "There's a whole book full of reasons why I shouldn't."

"What's the book called? The Bible?"

I rolled my eyes before I began to walk away to lesson. Taylor kept pace with through the slew of students.

"Look, all I'm saying is, guys our age don't exactly stick around if they're not getting anything." She said. "And it's not a bad thing for girls either. If the guy knows what he's doing, then it's great. Amazing, even. And he seems like he'd know what he's doing..." She

trailed off.

"I'm not going to sleep with him just to get him to stay with me." I said, dodging through people before we entered the science block. "And anyway, we're not even together. I don't think we ever were."

"Do you wanna be?"

Yes. I let silence answer for me.

"You do, right?" She said, somehow reading me. "Then come to the party. Have a little something to drink and I'll make sure to save a bedroom for you guys."

"Taylor. No." I shook my head. "I can't."

"What's holding you back?"

Myself.

The bell rang. *Saved by the... I'm not even going to finish thinking that cliché.* I stood next to the door to my classroom, taking note that it was dark inside with no teacher to let me and the other students around me in. Hopefully Mr Stevens was absent, so I wouldn't have to sit through a double science with Billy at my side.

"Think about coming." She said, pointing a finger at me as she turned to head to her next class. I nodded before we waved goodbye. I watched her as she strolled around the corner, her long black skirt swinging with every step. Someone else I recognised appeared from around the same corner and I felt my chest ache.

It was Billy.

From here I could see the brown bruise on his temple from last week and the newer one, closer to his jaw, which was a dark purple. We caught eyes and I awkwardly jerked my head away, trying to act as though I'd never seen him. My eyes grabbed onto the clock, not looking away from the hand which pointed 3 minutes to the hour. It wasn't like him to be early; he was either just on time or exactly four minutes late or not coming at all.

"What was that?" I heard him ask as he came to stand behind me.

"What was what?" I said, innocently as I faced him.

"C'mon, don't be difficult." He crossed his arms. "I know you saw me."

"...Okay. Yeah, I did." I shrugged. "So, what?"

"Why did you ignore me?" He said, head lowering slightly.

"Why did you leave?" I asked in a hushed voice.

"Why did I-"

"I woke up and you'd left. You said you wouldn't." I said, voice small.

"You promised."

"Clare, I had to." He said, uncrossing one arm and using it to gesture wildly as blue fire burnt in his eyes. "Your brother was up. I couldn't take the chance that he'd find me."

"Okay." I said, trying to sound indifferent.

"Okay?" He said. "So, we're fine then?"

"I guess." I said.

He nodded, looking unsure. Disappointment settled itself onto the set of his jaw. It was a look I didn't think I'd ever seen cross his face before. Normally he was cocky and sure of everything he did, but us cooling down from a potentially full-blown argument had made him look unsure and disappointed? I couldn't understand him sometimes... I couldn't understand him *most* times.

"You're here early." I commented, still prickly.

"Turning over a new leaf and all that crap." He leant against the wall. "Can't have any more detentions. Not with my dad paying attention."

I looked away and a weight settled in my stomach at the thought of what happened to Billy. He'd asked me last night not to tell Hopper, which I thought was a huge mistake. But that's what Billy wanted. He

didn't want people to look at him with sympathy plastered onto their faces nor did he want people like Tommy H to make fun of him for being beaten by his father. The looks of sympathy I'd gotten after Hannah... and then the laughs and nicknames I'd gotten when I ended up in the hospital were nearly unbearable. Billy in that situation would be dangerous. Knowing him and his temper, he'd pick fights with anyone who looked at him wrong, including the people who looked at him with sympathy. *Especially* those people. If I had to choose between names and sympathy filled looks, it'd be the names any day. The sympathy made me feel weak... I wasn't weak, or I at least hoped I wasn't.

My eyes focused on his jacket. It was the one he'd wrapped around my shoulders at the park, the one that Steve had put in my closet. I wondered why Steve hadn't asked about it. Hopefully Steve had just thought I'd bought a new one.

"You found your jacket, then. Did you take that back this morning?" I asked, knowing my voice was concealed by the noise the other students were making.

"No." He said. "Your brother gave it back to me."

"What?!" My voice raised. "When?"

"The other day. When I was picking Max up," Billy paused before letting out a small chuckle. "He threatened me."

"He threatened you? Does he know about what we-" I said. "What did you say?"

"Relax, Princess." He rolled his eyes. "I didn't say shit. But he probably does thinks there's somethin' going on between us."

I focused on the clock again, watching time tick away, and wondering how much time would pass before Steve would confront me about Billy.

"He's right for once, though." Billy said.

I jerked my head to Billy, feeling blood rush to my cheeks as something stirred in my stomach; something which was cold and

needed Billy's fire.

...

Billy looked over at me, a mischievous smirk on his face. His tongue darted out to lick his lips. The wet muscle lolled out, flattening as it rubbed sensually across his lips... was that it had looked like in the locker room when he'd kissed me down there? It certainly felt as wet and silky as Billy's tongue looked.

"Miss Harrington?"

My attention snapped back to Mr Stevens and all the students who had been watching me. The teacher was waiting for an answer. The students stared at me, thankfully looking dead bored, not coy as they would if they'd seen me watching Billy's tongue.

"Miss Harrington?" Mr Stevens said once more, frown deepening.

"What was... the question?" I asked and cringed when some people sniggered. Billy sniggered too, which made my blood bubble in annoyance.

"What type of cell division is occurring on the board?" He asked, voice stern. My eyes glanced over the diagram, before my mind settled on its answer.

"Meiosis?" I said, cheeks heating as I felt everyone continue to stare at me.

"Wrong. *Mitosis*." Mr Stevens scowled as he corrected, making me realise just how much I missed being taught science by Mr Clarke. "Maybe next time paying attention would help."

The class turned around as he began speaking again. Billy's knee knocked against my thigh, but I was determined not to lose focus on the lesson again. Cell division was easy, and I was embarrassed I'd gotten such a simple question wrong.

Once the teacher had given us our task – copying out pages 5-11 from our textbooks – the classroom began to fill with chatter. I looked over to Billy and saw he was making notes for once. He

caught me looking and smirked.

"That was embarrassing." He said.

"I know!" I sighed as I lent my face on my free hand. "I can't believe I got it wrong."

"No, I meant everyone catching you staring at me with your bedroom eyes."

"Bedroom eyes?"

"Yeah, those eyes you make when you wanna fuc-"

"Billy!" I cut him off in a hurried whisper, aware of Betty and Gloria sat behind us, eerily quiet as if they were listening to us.

"Miss Harrington!" Mr Stevens' voice rang out, low and edging fury. "Do your work. If I have to stop the class once more for you, I'll give you a detention. Is that clear?"

My mouth gaped.

"Do I have to repeat the question?" He asked. Some people sniggered.

"No, Sir."

"No, it's not clear to you?" He tilted his head.

"No, it's clear." I said. "I understand."

"Good. Back to work class." He turned his attention back to marking papers at his desk.

I let out a breath, willing the hands on the clock at the front of the class to move faster. If only I had powers like that Jane girl. That would really come in handy right now.

My thoughts of powers were jerked away as Billy bumped his leg into mine once more.

"You're such a pushover, y'know." He said, voice masked by students' chatter.

"What?" I said.

"That's your problem. You're a pushover. You go along with things, like sheep."

"No, I don't." I flicked the page, but Billy caught my wrist.

"I'm not done copying this page yet." He told me as he released my hand. The page fell back to its original state. "And yeah, you do go along with things. Like just then with Stevens. You should have told him to shove his question up his saggy old ass."

"I can't do that."

"You need to be more outgoing." Billy said.

"He's a teacher." I said.

"Well, I'm not a teacher and it didn't take too long for me to convince you to do stuff in the shower that first time." Billy dropped his pen on his book, before leaning back on the stool. "And outside class today, I thought you were gonna skin me alive the way you were looking at me, but you just said: 'okay, then.' Like me leaving your house was no big deal when it clearly was to you."

"I didn't want to argue." I said, but Billy carried on as though I hadn't spoken.

"And you were willing to pay the vet bill in full with no argument. If it wasn't for me, you be a few hundred dollars short. *And* you nearly let Neil convince you to stay for dinner. I'm quite proud you lied to get out of it actually. But, overall, you're still a pushover."

"No, I'm not."

"Sure about that?" He smirked.

"Yes!"

"Miss Harington!" Stevens shouted. "Detention."

I looked over to Billy and saw him smirking as if he were waiting for

me to do something. So, I did. I stood up and for once didn't pay attention to all the eyes I knew were on me.

Before I knew it, the words had left me.

"You can shove your detention up your ass! Your... saggy old ass."

The silence after my voice had faded was incredible and my rosy cheeks felt furnace hot. Billy started to laugh which set the whole class off. I gathered my things and ran from the class, ignoring Mr Stevens's orders for me to come back.

...

"So, when's your detention?" Billy asked as he leant next me against the wall of lockers. I was putting my science book back, cringing as I thought of earlier. I'd been sent to the principles office by another teacher. The principle had gone easy on me, knowing that I wasn't a repeat offender. Following Billy's lead had landed me in deep shit, but I was the dumbass who listened to him. It was my fault I had landed a detention.

"Monday."

"Nice. I got one Monday too. I'll drive you back." His face lowered to mine, and I glanced about, making sure that no one saw. "And who knows, maybe the boys' locker room'll be empty again." He said, grin roguish.

I moved away from him and closed my locker, glaring at him.

"By the way, earlier... it was nice." He said.

"Huh?" I asked as we began walking through the near empty hallway.

"Telling Stevens to shove it." He said.

"Oh- uh, thanks, I guess." I said, fiddling with my bag strap.

"But you're still a pushover."

"What? How?" I looked up to him.

"You basically did what I said to prove you weren't one. Key words: ya did what I said." He smirked, wrapping an arm around my neck.

"You're such a dick." I shrugged him off.

"And you're such a princess, Princess." He said.

"Takes one to know one." We gave each other matching sarcastic smirks.

...

I sat at my desk with the window open as I studied, and the fresh air swirled around me. The box sat across from me, inches away. I stared at it, and it stared right back at me.

You're such a pushover.

You need to be more outgoing.

The box taunted me, using Billy's earlier words.

My hand inched toward it, ignoring the sinister shivers sent along my spine from Deja vu. It had only been days since I'd touched the box in the dream, and now seeing my hand reach out for it, just as I had in the dream, made everything seem that much more haunting. How had I dreamt of something I hadn't known existed? Logically, I thought I'd probably seen the box as a child and had forgotten about it until it popped up in dreamland. The whole thing was still totally creepy, but my theory could be a reasonable explanation for it.

I reached out and took it from its place.

My index finger traced where my initials had been carved in

I fiddled with the padlock, pulling at it as I tried to break it off. It wouldn't give, so I grabbed my stapler from the desk and used the butt end to smash it. The metal gave a small groan and then broke away from the box.

I could open it. If I wanted to.

I did want to. Very much.

My door creaked open. My hand jerked from the box, as if I were about to be caught handling an illegal item. In walked Steve. He held one hand on the doorknob and the other rested on his hip. His stance and his stoic expression told me something was up.

"Hey, Steve." I said.

"Little birdy told me you got detention today." He took a few steps into my room, both hands resting on his hips.

"Yeah?" I said, confused. "I did."

"And it was because of Billy, right?" My mind convulsed. Who had told him that?

"How did you know?"

"I told you already; a little birdy." He shrugged.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Nancy."

"Who told her?" I said.

"I don't know." Both his hands rose in annoyance. "Point is: I thought you were gonna stay away from him. I mean, he's not exactly a *great guy* to be around."

"That doesn't matter. He's my lab partner." I shrugged. "I can't just not go to science."

He didn't reply. He starred at my wardrobe. I wondered if he was thinking about Billy's jacket, the one he'd hung in there and then tossed back in Billy's face the other day. Billy would probably wear it tomorrow, a reminder of what we'd done by the park a few nights ago. It was also a reminder to Steve that his sister had come through the door, crying and wrapped in a jacket smelling of cologne and cigarettes.

"Remember you telling me about the night you found that dog?" He said.

My blood stopped pumping. I caught Steve's brown eyes, the same colour as mine, and I looked away.

"You told me it was just you who found it." He said, eyes focused on my window. "On Thanksgiving. Max said it was you *and* Hargrove who found it. Why d'ya lie?"

"I didn't." I said. "I just didn't tell you I was with anyone."

He scoffed, looking me in the eye.

I frowned.

"Why did you leave him out of the story? What were you doing with him anyway?"

"Nothing." I shrugged.

"No. You don't get to tell me it's 'nothing' and brush this all off!" He carried on. "No way you're hanging out with him again."

"Well, too bad, Steve. You don't get to control me."

"Look." He crossed his arms. "I'm just trying-"

"Stop." I looked him in the eyes.

"What?"

"Stop trying. Whatever it is; protecting me or whatever." I said. "It's complete bullshit, so just stop."

"Bullshit?" His eyes softened before they once more became hard. I distantly remember him telling me about his fight with Nancy, the fight where she had called their whole relationship 'bullshit'. Afterwards, I would feel guilty for how much pleasure it gave me to use this word against Steve.

"Yeah! It is." I said.

"Okay, fine then. Hope you know what you're doing." He slammed the door.

"I do!" I called after him, determined to have the last word.

I stomped over to my bedside table, picked up my stupid pink phone and called Taylor. I decided I was going to the damn party. I wasn't some stupid pushover, nor was I the good little sister. I was going to go Tina's party and actually have fun. I wasn't going to study like Steve or my parents wanted, like Taylor and Billy expected. I was going to live a little; show everyone that I was more than some perfect little princess.

After my phone call with Taylor, all thoughts of the box were put away, shadowed by my fury at Steve and annoyance with Billy. I settled on having a bath, then going to bed. The box lay alone as the dust settled.

...

Friday 30th November 1984

"I'm off to the party then." I said, voice lacking the normal friendliness it had when talking to Steve. We were still mad at each other.

"Are you coming back later?" He glanced at me before swiftly returning his gaze to his college essay. I swear, in his free time if he wasn't with those kids then he was working on this essay. I guess that he wanted to earn a place in college rather than have dad buy his way in. We had that in common.

"I'm not." I said. "I'm sleeping over Taylor's."

"Have fun." Steve said, curtly.

"I will." I said before I swiftly exited the study.

...

The vibrations from the speakers bled into the soles of my feet and my forearms as I leant against the bannister surrounding the house. I

could even feel the music in my red cup – my fourth one tonight. The masses of teens jumped and danced along to the music and in the middle of them was Billy, held up by a few of the jocks as he did a keg stand.

I scoffed as they cheered him on, chanting his name and willing for him to beat his record. The last time I'd witnessed this it was Halloween and Tommy had been next to Billy as he broke Steve's record. Now, Tommy was at home with a bruised and swollen face. I could still picture the anger that wrinkled Hargrove's face when he pounded into him. Did Hargrove think that Tommy deserved it? I hadn't asked him much about why they'd fought, but what little Hargrove had told me made it seem as though Tommy deserved it. I couldn't help but think he'd gotten that from his dad; that somehow someone deserved being beaten. No one should deserve that. But I suppose that life isn't like that, people don't get what they deserve, they get what they are given. Hannah didn't deserve what happened to her, the event that led to her end. Billy didn't deserve to have an abusive father, but that's what he was given.

He finished the keg stand, his feet dropped to the floor as one of the jocks around him squealed; '20 seconds!'. I gathered from the screaming of his adoring fans that his record had been broken. I rolled my eyes as he walked up the path, shouting over the music: 'that's how you do it, Hawkins'.

I strolled into the house, casting him a look over my shoulder. Recognition panged in his eyes and all at once the caveman shouting at his fans became concerned with one thing; catching me. He ignored the people in his way as he pushed passed them. I carried on weaving through the partygoers, a rush of adrenaline in my chest sparked me forward like the battery in Billy's car. I made it to the bathroom door when I felt a hand on elbow. He pulled me to face him.

His blue eyes seemed to make the room go quiet.

"Hey." He said, forehead creased as he smoothed a hand up and down my naked arm. "Didn't know you'd be here."

"Disappointed are we?" I said, my back hitting the bathroom door.

He slowly shook his head as a killer smirk settled onto his face. His red shirt was open, letting me see the slick sun kissed skin of his chest. A warmth stirred in my stomach and pushed out the cold as I imagined running my hands over his flesh.

He leaned in and I moved away, conscious of how packed the room was.

"What's wrong?" He looked at me, eyes alight with humour.

"You stink." I wrinkled my nose, the excuse entirely truthful. He did stink. Of beer and sweat and cigarettes and... something else that was just so delicious.

"Oh, yeah?" He smiled, flirtatious as he placed his other hand on the door, trapping me. "Well, I bet your kinky ass loves how I smell."

I couldn't help the coy smile that spread across my face.

"Kinky?" I asked.

"Yep." His tongue slid across his bottom lip and my eyes followed it.

He lent in, his nose resting against the neck, before I felt the door move from behind us. I fell back but was held up by Billy's arms. I clung to him as I regained balance and swung my head to look at what had happened to the door.

Someone had opened it. They stood there, mouth wide as they took me and Billy in. My face held the same expression of confusion as I squinted at them.

"Nancy?" I said.

"Clare?" Nancy and another voice replied. I untangled myself from Billy's arm. Jonathan came to stand behind Nancy, hair as dishevelled as hers.

"You two having fun?" Billy asked from behind me and I could hear the smirk in his voice.

"Plenty." Jonathan scowled.

"That's great, freak." Billy placed a hand on my back.

I frowned at Billy as I took in what he'd said to Jonathan.

"Don't call him that!" Nancy slurred before she pointed a finger at him. "And you!" She jabbed her finger at me. "Why are you hanging around him? Why d'you let him call Jonathan that?"

"I- I-"

"Stay out of it, Wheeler." Billy interrupted me.

"Piss off, Hargrove." Nancy scowled as she stumbled away from us.

"Hey Clare, why don't you come hang with us?" Jonathan said.

"Jonathan!" Nancy called before gesturing for him to come to her.

Jonathan made to follow Nancy but before he got there, he was pushed against the wall. Hargrove held his collar. Jonathan's hands raised to grip at Hargrove's wrists.

"Stay away from her." He growled, his face close to Jonathan's.

"Billy, stop it!" I said as I tried to rip his hands away from Jonathan.

He let go of him as he pushed Jonathan's back against the wall once more, as if Jonathan burnt him. Jonathan and Billy glared at each other like predators staring each other down before fighting over a dead animal. Nancy tugged her boyfriend along, toward the exit.

"What the hell, Billy?" I asked.

He turned to me, a blue fire burnt behind his eyes.

"What do you mean 'what the hell'?" He turned his blue fire on me.

"Why did you do that?" I said.

"Because that little freak was asking for it!" He threw his hands up.

"No, he wasn't!" I shouted. "He didn't push you up against a wall, did he? No, that was all you. Why can't you just act normal?"

"Oh, yeah, 'cause you know tons about being normal." He tossed the words at me. "Didn't your friend kill herself? That's normal. And I heard you were in the loony bin 'cause you couldn't handle it, right? The little Princess couldn't handle it."

If this were a movie, or if it had played out in my head, as soon as those words left Billy's mouth there would have been a sweet tinge of regret swimming in his eyes. But this was not a movie, nor was it imagined. There was no sweet regret that told me somewhere inside him he was already sorry. There was only fury – a blue fire that burnt at my flesh.

I felt heavy with the weight of the crowd's eyes fall onto my shoulders and tug at my tear ducts. Despite the music still playing, the crowd had gone quiet and had ceased their movements, too enthralled by our drama to carry on partying. I moved passed them, not feeling the tears that trekked down my flesh.

Hargrove didn't run after me, nor did he call my name. He didn't care.

...

I needed to be alone. I wanted to go home. But Tina was still partying, and I didn't want her to have to go home early because of me. There was no way I was going to get a ride from Jonathan. The house was crawling with teens and so was the garden, so I settled on stumbling into the woods, my hazed mind still spinning from alcohol and my fight with Billy.

The music from Tina's cabin reverberated through the woods and bounced off trees almost like a reminder to not go too far. I leant against a tree and starred up to the stars. I was glad to live in Hawkins – a small town where, on most nights, there was a blanket of stars against the black sky. But tonight, there were only a few out, most hidden by charcoal colored clouds as others blinked, barely visible.

I watched as my breath swirled into the air like smoke from a cigarette – one of Billy's cigarettes. I dug my feet in and closed my eyes as I tried to vanish all thoughts of that asshole from my mind.

He hadn't felt guilty after he said that, right? He told me in the bathroom yesterday that he didn't care. He didn't care. Not about me or anything I'd been through. But was that asking too much? They were my problems. Why should Billy take on more problems than he already has?

"Clare."

My eyes shot open. Had someone followed me?

A gust rustled the trees. A few leaves fell down, reminiscent of the cancer particles from the upside down. This place, with dark roots and branches that snaked along the ground, really did look like the upside down. I glanced over my shoulder. All I saw was Tina's cabin, a spot of burnt yellow light in the darkness.

There was no one around who could have said my name. Shivers scuttled down my spine. The hairs on my arms raised.

Something far off moved through the trees. It span and lurched as it came closer. It looked cold. It looked as if it carried a sickness.

A sickness I didn't want to catch.

...

A moth just flew into my face – thought I'd share that with you.

...Thanks for reading

I was wondering if anyone has any theories about Clare or the box because I'm curious to see if anyone is right. I've dropped some hints about the dreams, the upside down's plans and even endgame stuff, but I wanted to see if anyone figured it out.

I should probably reveal the insides of the box next chapter. Bear with me...

Hal (guest reviewer): Omg, thank you for your review! It literally propelled me to write more. And I'm a woman, btw lol. And you don't have to send a vid of you running naked through the forest. I do this for free. No nudity required. Loooool

13. The Box

13... Unlucky for some but not for you guys coz you only had to wait 6 days for this chapter hehe.

...

Chapter 13: The Box

'I don't know what it means, no. What does he want from me?' Fire Breather - Laurel

Saturday 1st December 1984

Fear. Disgust. I was never sure which was more intense. I supposed it was kind of a toss-up when you wake up covered in blood.

I pulled the sheets from my body, got up and waddled to the bathroom. I stripped off before I stepped into the shower. The water was cold at first, but I didn't mind that because it soothed the pounding of my temples. I cursed myself for drinking last night – although I don't remember drinking so much that I would have this big of a headache.

Come to think of it; I didn't remember much at all.

There was Taylor's mom driving us there, Billy doing a keg stand, teenagers drinking and dancing. I was sure Jonathan and Nancy had been there, which was odd since it didn't really seem like Jonathan's scene, but I figured Nancy must've convinced him to go. But that had to have been weird for her, the last time she'd partied at Tina's she'd had a different boyfriend. My brother. But if Nancy hadn't wanted to go, then had it been Jonathan's idea? There was no way of that being right.

After a few instants of sifting through foggy memories of last night, the water turned warm and I closed my eyes. One memory came over me like a heated blanket in winter; Billy and I under the warm spray of the shower. His blue eyes hungry and after the hunger was satisfied, they filled with vulnerability. Another memory struck me

then, a poignant one from last night, one where the same blue eyes had been filled with malice. He'd taunted me about Hannah's suicide, a blow so low I hadn't suspected even he was capable of it. Jokes or bullying about those things were reserved for people like Tommy and Carol. But weren't they the ones he first hung out with when he got to town? So, I guessed it only made sense he'd be exactly the type of person to say those things.

I got out of the shower and used the toilet. I found I wasn't bleeding – I never was when I woke up – and I thought about the period I was supposed to be having soon. Maybe my normal cycle would straighten it all out and I'd go back to normal. Or maybe, I thought with a scowl, I wouldn't even get my period. It made sense that I wouldn't. After all, the amount of times I'd bled irregularly was bound to mean something was wrong with my insides.

I dried and dressed before opening the door to my bedroom. I stepped onto a cold patch of my carpet, immediately wishing that I'd put on my fluffy pink socks instead of my thin stripy ones, before I looked down to the offending cold spot.

It was a wet patch. But it was more than just a patch. It was shaped like something: a small foot print. It was half the size of mine and angled as though it had come from the bathroom. Had a small burglar been in the shower with me and gotten wet feet before deciding to run off? It was doubtful, of course. I would've noticed if someone had been under the spray with me.

The door didn't have footprints under it, likely meaning that the small wet person hadn't gone through it. I followed the trail of footprints, ignoring the copper scent coming from my sheets, and froze when I saw where they led.

Each tiny footprint had directed me to my desk. The desk the box sat on.

My breathing quickened. My muscles tensed.

Something wanted me to open that thing.

I breathed out and was struck by a memory of last night: of leaning

against a tree and breathing out into the cold air. I had watched as my breath swirled away from me like cigarette smoke.

My palms began to sweat. My neck itched.

I took small step forward as if being pulled. I sat in my desk chair. I opened the box.

A small puff of dust that had clung to the edges of the box drifted outward as I lifted the lid.

I paused for a second and held the lid at an acute angle. I watched as the dust settled around the box before I opened it all the way. I dropped the lid and it hit the table, making a hollow knock. I breathed out, relieved to see that all it held were baby pictures. They were presumably photos of me as a baby.

I pouted. I had been so worked up about opening this box and all I found was this. My stomach lurched with how stupid I felt.

I looked to the floor. There were no footprints. Had I imagined them? Was I seeing things? Was my head bad again? I blinked and willed frustrated tears not to fall.

I picked up half the pile of photos and started to sift through them, wanting a distraction from my own thoughts.

I was a weird looking baby. Big brown eyes and chubby cheeks. I found one where I was probably only a few hours old and wrapped up in a hospital blanket. I was held in the arms of a woman – likely my mom – in a hospital bed. Mom had probably just given birth from the look of it. The top of the photo had been folded over where Mom's shoulders started. I unfolded it. Brown eyes and ginger hair met me. My mom had green eyes and blonde hair. This woman who held me as a baby was not my mother. Was the baby even me? It had to have been. All the other photos were definitely me. But she wasn't my mother. She couldn't be. The child, whose face was barely visible, couldn't have been me.

So, who was this woman and her mystery child? And why was a photo of them mixed in with my baby photos? I turned the photo

over and found that nothing was written there, no clue as who they were or what day this was taken.

My brow creased as I continued looking through the pile of photos for another picture of them. The edge of a piece of wrinkled brown paper caught my eyes and I tugged it from its place among the photos. It slid out with a hiss. It was a newspaper clipping. The ink had faded in some places but was still legible.

'Dr Martin Brenner Named in Second Lawsuit' the headline read.

"After the district attorney declined to press criminal kidnapping charges against the research facility and staff of the Department of Energy, citing lack of evidence..."

Wait, the Department of Energy? Wasn't that the place that creepy girl was from? Wasn't that the place that covered up Will's disappearance? And Barbara's death.

"...another case has been brought forward." I carried on reading. "The federal research study patient, Clara Hertz..."

Clara Hertz. I looked at the initials carved onto the box. 'C.H.'

I carried on reading. "...died after testing..." My eyes widened as I skimmed the clipping, murmuring to myself as I read. "...MKUltra... Dr. Martin Brenner... human experiments and abuse claims... Terry Ives... the deaths of Hertz and her unborn child..."

So, the picture was of Clara Hertz and her baby, not some stranger holding me. But the article had said 'unborn' baby. I wasn't sure, but I thought I remembered Steve telling me something similar about the creepy girl. He'd told me how the lab had stolen the girl from her mother and claimed that she had never carried the baby to full term. I couldn't talk to Steve about this though. Somehow, he'd weed out of me the dreams and the blood and the footprints... he'd think my head was my bad again – and my head probably was but I was not going back to the hospital, not ever. I never wanted to be pitied ever again. I didn't want to be a freak again.

But I needed answers. I had no way of discretely contacting the

creepy girl, nor did I want to bring Chief Hopper into this.

But there was one person I could ask. One person I trusted who knew about all this stuff.

I placed the photos back in the box and placed the clipping on top of them before closing it. I walked to my bedside table and picked up the phone, once more ignoring the crimson that marred what once were crisp white sheets, before I dialled the number. It took a few rings before anyone picked up.

"Hello?" A small voice spoke.

"Will?" I asked.

"Yeah." He said, voice cautious. "Who's this?"

"It's Clare." I said.

"Oh! Hi, *Clare*." He said, voice chipper as he enunciated my name. "Dustin's here if you want to speak to him." He said, tone playful. I could practically see the little smile spread across his pale face.

I heard a clamber in the background, as if a chair had fallen behind someone as they abruptly stood. There was a voice in the background and it shouted at Will, though I couldn't figure out what it was saying.

"Why would Dustin want to- never mind." I said, eyes rolling at the strangeness of the boys. "Is Jonathan there?"

"Um, yeah. I'll go get him. I'm passing the phone to Dustin." He said quickly. There were a few knocks against the phone as if it had been roughly passed on to Dustin.

There was nothing but static for a solid five seconds.

"Hello?" I said.

"Yeah, uh. C-Clare?" I heard Dustin stutter.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"What are you doing over there?"

"Where?"

"The Byers'." I said. *Where else?* I thought with a confused smile.

"Oh yeah. Yeah! I was here for a sleepover." He said. "Not that I have those often. Now that I'm a teenager and all." He sounded only *slightly* awkward. And by slightly, I mean *very*.

"That's... nice." I said. "Uh, how'd your science project go?"

"Oh, well, it was *cool*. We came first." He said, voice smoother than it had been just a second ago.

"Oh, nice." I said.

"It was totally nothing." I looked at the phone, eyebrows drawn together. '*Totally?*' He sounded like Steve.

"Is Jonathan there yet?" I asked.

"Oh, um. He's coming now." He said. "Is everything good?"

"Everything's fine." Apart from *most* things, including the box on my desk and the blood on my sheets and Hargrove being an asshole, yeah...everything was fine.

"Good. I mean, I don't care- not that I don't like you- but I don't like-like you... uh- Jonathan's here." He stuttered, panicked. "Bye, Clare."

"Bye?" I said.

"Clare?" Jonathan said.

"I need to talk to you." I said. "Can you meet me somewhere?"

"Sure." He said. "Is this about last night?"

"Last night?"

"Yeah, I dropped you home." He said.

"You did?" I asked, not remembering it.

"Uh- yeah? You were really out of it. Really drunk."

"I guess that explains why I remember next to nothing."

"Shit." He said.

"Well, I do remember how much of a dick Hargrove was to you. I'm sorry about that, by the way."

"Don't be, it was all him." He said. "Remember much else?"

I frowned. "That's about it. My memory's foggy after that."

I stood, put the phone in-between my shoulder and my ear and pulled the sheets from my bed.

"Do you remember coming out of the woods?" He asked as I bundled the sheet. "I saw you stumble out of there. Then I took you and Nance home."

"The woods?" A deep pit in my stomach span and lurched with cold dread. "I went in the woods? I don't remember that at all."

"Oh." He said, simply.

"Well, I must've been really drunk, like you said." I gave a small giggle, though it lacked humour and fell flat. "Hammered. Wasted."

"Yeah, wasted." He paused. "So, you wanted to meet up?"

"Yes. I uh- I've got some questions about- well, I'll tell you when I see you." I said. "Meet at... the library?"

"Sure." He said. "Are you sure you're okay? Should I come pick you up?"

"Yeah I'm fine. Scouts honour." I said as I bagged the sheets and sat on the edge of the mattress. "I'll walk there. Meet in an hour?"

"Okay."

"Kay. Bye, Jonathan." I said before I hung up.

Hopefully, in about an hour I'd have some answers about all this Hawkins lab bullshit.

...

We sat on the steps outside the library, letting the cold from the concrete seep into our behinds as we discussed Eleven and all the stuff Jonathan knew. I'd handed him the picture of the who I assumed was Clara Hertz and her mystery child as well as the newspaper clipping.

"So, her mom is Terry Ives?" I asked. "Are you sure this isn't a picture of her and Eleven?"

"No." He said. "I saw a picture of Terry Ives. She wasn't ginger."

"Maybe she died her hair?"

"No, I don't this is the same woman." He said, scowling at the picture. "Was there anything else in the box?"

I shook my head. For some reason my gut had prevented me from telling him about the baby pictures of me, it was just too weird for me to say out loud.

"I swear I saw her name in the clipping." I said as I skimmed the article. "Something about kidnapping charges. There." I pointed to it. "Terry Ives accused the lab of malnutrition, sleep deprivation... she described human experiments and abuse... claimed the research facility planned to use her unborn child to spy on Russian officials."

"All of it was true." Jonathan said. "This Clara Hertz woman is likely another Terry Ives."

"So, her kid is like Eleven?"

"Probably." He murmured, half paying attention to me as he read through the article once again. "It says her family filed the lawsuit.

Maybe we can start there, y'know. Find out who her family is."

"How are we supposed to do that?" I said.

"Well, there is a library behind us." He pointed over his shoulder as he gave me a small smirk. "How about we start there?"

My head jerked up and down as I gave an awkward nod. "Good idea."

...

An hour passed. We had sat at one of the computers going over the newspaper archives. We must've gone over about 50 or 60 separate articles and reports about the lab, yet we found no ties to anyone called Clara Hertz. The registry was next on our list. We poured over it, and the result was the same. As far as the archives and the town registry were concerned, Clara Hertz did not exist.

"What now?" I asked, exasperated from my seat next to the computer desk.

"I might know someone who knows a lot." Jonathan said, leaning his hands onto the desk as he stood.

"Come again?" I asked, looking up to him with a creased forehead.

"The investigator who helped..." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "...helped me and Nancy take down the lab."

My mouth slowly opened.

"If there's anyone that knows stuff they shouldn't, it'll be him." He nodded. "I'll try to contact him."

"Okay." I blinked.

"I'll keep the photo and the article so I can show him." He said, tucking them into his jeans pocket as I stood from the desk.

Maybe I shouldn't have opened the box. It had only given me more problems to solve.

...

Jonathan had driven me to the store where Joyce worked. I'd told him I needed groceries – and I did but what I really needed were new bedsheets.

"What were you guys even doing at the party anyway?" I asked as I tossed the sheets into the cart. It was still a mystery as to why Jonathan and Nancy had been at Tina's.

"Steve said t-" He cut himself off. Jonathan started to push the cart forward and I followed closely behind.

"Steve?" I asked.

"Forget it." He tapped his thumb on the handle of the cart sporadically. "It was nothing."

"Jonathan." I said, voice even. "What did he say? What aren't you telling me?"

"No, it's seriously not that important." He adjusted his grip on the shopping cart.

"Well, if it's not important, why not tell me?" I said. "I thought we were... tight. Y'know."

"Tight?" He smirked. Humour glinted in his eyes as his way of questioning my use of that particular word.

"You know what I mean. We're friends." I shrugged. "I need a friend right now."

He looked at me and his eyes shone under the fluorescent lights.

"I am your friend." He nodded once.

"Good." I smiled. "*Then...* you can tell me what my idiot brother said, right?"

He rolled his eyes as he realized he'd just been caught.

"Fine. Uh," He paused to clear his throat as he looked ahead of us. "He told me to watch out for you."

"What?" I said, scoffing. "Why?"

"He said he couldn't do it himself 'cause you'd get mad at him." He shrugged. "So, I was the best option for the job."

"But why would he need someone to look out for me?" I asked.

He raised his eyebrows at me. "Why do you think."

My smile faltered before fading completely.

The jacket. The one that Steve had unwrapped from my shoulders and given back to Billy Hargrove. It must've been so obvious to Steve what was going on.

"Look, you don't have to watch over me. Or protect me or whatever." I said as I shook my head. "I'm fine."

Jonathan said nothing.

"I'm fine." I repeated, trying to convince. Or was I trying to convince myself?

Jonathan stayed silent. He probably knew that if he said anything, he'd just be stoking my flames, making them grow higher and hotter.

"So, um..." I began, desperately searching for something, anything that would change the subject. "...is your mom working today?" I asked, as we turned the corner of the aisle.

"Uh- she..." Jonathan trailed off as his eyes narrowed at something.

I followed his eyes over to a man wearing blue jeans and a leather jacket. He spun on his heel and took a few steps toward us before he noticed me. A look of regret – or what I hoped was regret – came over his features for a sweet second before his eyes fell on Jonathan and hardened.

"What're you two doing here?" He said, voice like grit. There were

dark circles under his eyes and I no doubt had matching ones from my own hangover. The dark circles under his eyes made the color of his bruises pop.

"Just shopping." I said as an awkward smile took hold of my face. I realised, with a jolt, that I shouldn't have been smiling at him – not after last night – and the corners of my mouth dropped.

"Not that it's any of his business." Jonathan murmured in my direction although I was sure Billy heard it.

"You say something?" Hargrove asked, eyebrows raised as he stepped forward.

"Yeah, actually." Jonathan said, his chin inched upward. "I did."

"Guys." I said as I tried to steal their attention. "Cool it. Hargrove, I think you should go, okay? Just leave us alone."

"And why should I do that?" He asked, glancing at me as he took another step forward.

"Because if you don't, you'll get your ass kicked." Jonathan said, voice stern, leaving the cart and stepping around it.

Nothing except a few feet separated them now.

"You know," Hargrove smiled at him as he stalked closer. "I was beginning to doubt whether you had the balls to take down Stevie Wonder last year... guess I was wrong."

Only a few feet stood between us, a great divide that seemed to shrink by the second as Jonathan and Hargrove moved towards each other. My palms itched. If Steve hadn't told him to look out for me, would he still have talked to Hargrove like that?

"Stay away from her." Jonathan commanded.

Hargrove raised his eyebrows, not backing down. The fingers on his right hand twitched.

"Look, I'm not asking you, I'm telling you." Jonathan said.

"And what makes you think you can tell me what to do?" He growled as his smile dropped and was replaced with sinister hunger in his eyes.

"Boys!" I said, coming to stand between them. "Just cool it, okay?"

Neither of them looked at me, instead they carried on glaring at each other over my head. It was like the night of the fight, when I had stood between Steve and Hargrove. I felt cold dread settle in my stomach as I recalled that I had hadn't been able to stop the fight between them that night. Would I be able to stop Jonathan and Hargrove now if a fight broke out?

I wasn't sure if I could.

...

Hey guys! Sorry if there were any mistakes! Hope you enjoyed it!

I've been thinking a lot about the length of the overall story (y'know like how many chapters there'll end up being) and I really have no clue. I was aiming for 25 but somehow I know it's gonna end up being a bit longer than that.

Thanks for reading and reviewing! I had no idea when I posted chapter one that so many people would read this. It's honestly amazing. Thank you, guys!

Were you right about what was in the box? Were you disappointed? Surprised? I'd love to know

14. Louder than Words

Sorry if the start is a bit anticlimactic...

...

Chapter 14: Louder than Words

"Look, I'm not asking you, I'm telling you." Jonathan said.

"And what makes you think you can tell me what to do?" He growled. His smile dropped. A sinister hunger filled his eyes.

"Boys!" I said, coming to stand between them. "Just cool it, okay?"

Neither of them looked at me, instead they carried on glaring at each other over my head. It was like the night of the fight, when I had stood between Steve and Hargrove. I felt cold dread settle in my stomach as I recalled I had hadn't been able to stop the fight between them that night.

Would I be able to stop Jonathan and Hargrove now if a fight broke out?

I wasn't sure if I could.

"Billy." I said as I touched his arm. He flinched. His wide and stormy eyes held mine for a fleeting second. He pulled his eyes from mine as he shook his head.

"Whatever." He grimaced before he turned on his heel. He left us stood there, observers to him fleeing.

For once, when faced with the age-old decision of fight or flight, he had chosen flight. I remembered his butterfly shaped bruises and longingly hoped he would choose this route more often.

"What was that about?" I span to face Jonathan.

"What was what about?" He asked. "He was being an asshole."

"And so were you." I said.

"Wait-what?" His brow wrinkled. "Why're you mad at me?"

"I'm not!"

"Well, it sure seems like it."

I sighed and shook my head. *"Fuck. Sorry, I pounced. He just... has a way of getting under my skin."*

"Yeah, he does that." I chose to ignore his comment as I walked around to the trolley and started to push it.

"Let's just finish shopping, okay?" I asked.

The air had changed. I felt looks from Jonathan, looks that told me I was an idiot for letting him get to me. But that was how it had been since day 1 with Billy Hargrove. He knew how to get under my skin, how to rile me up and get my blood to boil. I bet he even enjoyed it.

...

My fist rapped on Steve's bedroom door – a courtesy he didn't afford me as he preferred to waltz into my room unannounced – and waited for him to reply.

"Come in." Came his muffled voice from behind the wooden door.

I swung the door open and stepped inside.

His bed was a mess. The curtains were closed even though it was still day outside. The floor needed a vacuum. Stationary and balled up paper surrounded him and his desk. Steve himself was in the same condition as his room; tired and messy. Dark circles, flat hair, unusually pale skin.

But I – being in the mood I was in – didn't care to notice this until afterward.

"Hey, Clare." He said, voice sounding apologetic as he turned to greet me in his spinning chair. I guessed that he wanted to make up after

the spat we'd had on Thursday, but I wasn't in the mood for that.

"You told Jonathan to look out for me?" I said.

His eyes grew wide.

"Well?" I asked. "It's true, right?"

"Oh my God." He sighed, rolling his eyes as he ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah."

"You dickhead." I said as I shook my head.

"Uh, what?" He said, shoulders raising as if even his body were confused.

"I don't need anyone to look out for me." I said as my arms crossed.

"Oh really?" He nodded, eyes wide and hair shaking as his head bobbed.

"Yes. Really." My eyebrows drew together.

He scoffed. "That's just not true. You're hanging out with *Hargrove*. He's a bad guy, Clare. I thought you were smarter than that. *And* why are you seeing that doctor again?"

He must've thought that I had seen Dr Holmes, even though I had told him otherwise. I shook my head, stumped for the right words – any words – in my anger. Why had he brought that up? I couldn't help but feel betrayed.

"There's something going on with you, Clare." He crossed his arms. Steve's eyes had a hard edge to them, an edge that cut into me. "Just tell me."

"Why do you care so much now? The last time I got *bad*, you didn't give a crap. You weren't there. You didn't even defend me when your pal Tommy made fun of 'Crazy Clare'. The 'freak'. But I guess you were just ashamed of being associated with me, right? You were *disgusted* by me." I felt my eyes burn as I remembered those months. In and out of the hospital. Mom and Dad only there to pick up the

bill, and Steve... he didn't give a *shit*. He was more interested in hanging out with Tommy H or fucking around with girls. The Steve who used to chase butterflies with me was gone. "Admit it. The only reason you're here now is because you feel guilty and it's eating you up. Or maybe it's just 'cause you're bored, right? Lonely and bored."

Steve's eyes glistened. He shook his head and his dumb hair followed his movements. My lower lip mirrored his as it trembled. Before I had realised what was happening, arms were wrapped around me. My throat ached as I held sobs in.

Steve shushed me, told me that he cared because I was his little sister. He said he was sorry. That he was a dickhead. That he hated when Tommy had made fun of me but was too much of a coward to go against what others had expected of him at that time. He told me that he was never disgusted by me, he was disgusted by himself. He hadn't come near me during my time in the hospital because he was ashamed of *himself* for letting his friends make fun of me. All the while, I silently cried into his shoulder. I felt his own tears fall onto me, each tear a confession. Eventually I wrapped my arms around his back, knowing that he needed a hug too.

I told him that he was forgiven. I said that he had grown up so much. And I said I loved him. And I was sorry for always stealing his Farrah Fawcett spray, to which he laughed and said I could use it anytime. I said that by telling Jonathan to look after me, he was just being a good big brother. I told him that I wasn't used to people looking out for me. I guessed we were sort of in the same boat on that one.

...

The ground crunched under my feet.

The woods behind Tina's cabin seemed to go on endlessly. Despite the party going on behind me, the world was ghost-quiet. Every step past towering trees in the black night and every crunch of the vines on the ground took me further from the cabin. The vines I tread lightly on were reminders of the one that had come alive and wrapped around Dustin's leg, like a demonic tentacle, when we had ventured into the upside down. A sensation like a thousand crab legs scuttling down my spine caused me to pause when I thought I saw one of them

move. Though the movement was probably my imagination, the chill was still there, a dim reminder that perhaps it was not imagined. The chill felt as though it were a warning – something was out there. Something alive. Watching and waiting for Little Red Riding Hood to let her guard down so that it may strike.

A crack came from behind.

I span around.

A girl stood arm's length away from me.

Her dress and hair dripped with water, and her corpse-white skin glistened with moisture. I wondered if she was cold, but she did not shiver – not once – nor did she wrap her skeletal arms around her figure. There was no indication that she sought out warmth. She was content to be as cold as her ice blue eyes, the eyes which all at once seemed to study me and look through me as if she knew my every secret, my every sin.

"Um, hello." I said.

She tilted her head.

"How old are you?" I asked. "Where's your mother?"

"Mother..." She breathed out, yet no steam came from her lips. "She's safe."

"And you're not safe?" I said. For a moment I thought of Billy and his dad. Perhaps this girl was abused too, and she had escaped into the night, searching for help.

"...This is a dream, y'know." She said.

My stomach turned as if my organs were replaced by snakes.

"It can't be... Tina's is right behind me..." I turned and pointed to where the party was supposed to be. It was not there. I blinked before I turned back to the little girl.

"I want a doggy." She sighed. "Mommy said I could have one."

My eyes trailed along the dripping dress to her thin calves, then I saw her bare feet. She stood in a small puddle, her bare feet swamped by the mixture of mud and water.

"It almost got you." She stepped toward me.

"What?" I asked. "What almost got me?"

"You should run."

"Why?" I asked.

"Just run, pea-brain."

"Where?"

She pointed with a thin arm. I started to walk in that direction, not wanting to run. My head faced her as my body moved, not letting my eyes leave hers, but once I was a few paces from her, I faced forward so that I didn't face-plant into one of the trees.

"Bye bye." She said.

I looked behind and saw that she had disappeared. I shook my head as I carried on through the trees, cursing as I tripped over a branch. I regained my footing and swiftly carried on through the shadow trees.

"Clare." I thought the girl whispered.

"What?" I turned once more.

A smoke shape cartwheeled gracefully from between the trees twenty feet from me.

Feather-light shivers ran along my spine.

I took the girl's advice and ran. I twisted around trees and jumped over a log. The vines and roots cracked and broke as I trampled over them. I turned my head once and saw it still followed me. My nails dug into trees as I passed them to propel my body further away from that *thing*. I heard an alarm not far away and I used it to guide me. I saw the edge of the forest. I sprinted for it. My lungs ached.

Once I was out of the forest, I turned back and saw that the thing was nowhere in sight. I breathed a sigh of relief that mixed with my pants for oxygen. I panted as I turned my head to the sky. It was an empty dead-black, lacking the stars it normally and so bountifully offered to stargazers.

The alarm was still going off.

My eyes trailed along the black sky until my eyes landed on the oppressive building.

I was at the top of a hill overlooking Hawkin's Lab. That was where the alarm was coming from.

The alarm morphed into the ring of a telephone.

I blinked and opened my eyes. I found my white ceiling, and felt heavy bedsheets wrapped around me. *It was another fucking dream.*

I sat up in bed and leant over to pick up the ringing phone. I wiped my face as I brought the phone to my ear.

"Hello?" I asked before a yawn stretched across my face.

"Is this Clare Harrington? This is the veterinarians." Her voice rasped, and I knew this was the woman who had given us a discount because Billy had flirted with her.

My eyes narrowed.

Nothing good would come of this conversation.

...

Monday 3rd December 1984

"The vets called yesterday." I told Hargrove with a hushed voice, aware of our chaperone Miss Newbury, a middle-aged woman with wild copper hair and bug glasses, who sat slumped at the front desk as gentle snores rolled from her.

There were no other students in detention today and despite the

bountiful seating choice, Hargrove had decided to sit directly behind me on the second to last desk. This of course had grated on my fractured nerves, but I decided to at least make the most of this arrangement by quietly telling him what the vets had phoned me about.

"...They said the dog didn't make it." I whispered, frowning. "He just... his heart gave up."

"What, like a heart attack?" He said, voice a low rumble.

"I guess so." I shrugged and sniffed.

"Serves it right." He leant back in his desk with a scowl. "Dumb dog shouldn't have been in the middle of the road."

My eyes stung as I stared at him.

How had someone who had handled the dog with so much care the night we found it said something like that?

Did his actions speak louder than his words? Didn't he care for the dog? Was acting out and being callous were his way of grieving? Was this some sort of defence mechanism? A tool he no doubt used often when dealing with his father. He'd told me he'd lost his mother and being left with only Neil Hargrove I couldn't help but wonder if Billy had been raised to act a certain way when grieving or if this was something he'd developed on his own.

His mouth closed as the realisation that he'd been too harsh took hold of him. This was the look I had longed to see on his face after he'd said those things about Hannah to me.

I turned around in my seat, pony tail swinging as I shook my head. Miss Newbury snored softly at the front of the class. *It must've been nice to sleep soundly or dream of nothing at all.*

"Princess." He whispered. "Look, I'm sorry. Okay? I shouldn't have said that."

I tensed up as I decided to ignore him. He was quick to apologise for what he said about the dog, yet he still hadn't apologised for

anything else. He hadn't apologised about his behaviour at the store or at the party or for the way he treated Max and Steve and Lucas.

I heard him sigh from behind me.

"Princess, c'mon."

I shook my head, still facing the front.

"Princess?"

I pursed my lips. I wouldn't let them tremble. I wouldn't let him make me cry again.

"...Clare."

Abruptly, I turned in my desk and my eyes narrowed as I took in the sight of him. His upper body was sprawled across the desk, right arm stretched further out than the left as if reaching out for me. He reminded me of a cat – though he was more like a lion – with his head rested sideways against his arm. He saw me turn to him and immediately his head rose.

"What?" I asked, voice raised.

Miss Newbury gave out a loud snore – more of a snort, really – before straightening up in her chair. I turned as she did so and caught her eyes.

"Hey!" She pointed at us. "You two talking?"

"No, Miss Newbury." I answered, voice small and polite. I felt my cheeks flush. "We would never."

"Okay, well... since you've been so good for me... why don't you both go early." She itched her hair, before she tried to flatten a particularly frizzy part.

"Thank you, Miss Newbury." I said, smiling as I stood.

Just as I was about to grab my bag, Billy's hands grasped onto it. I looked up to him, eyes hard.

"Let me carry this for you." He said.

Any objections died on my tongue as he thanked Miss Newbury with a charming smile. You'd never think he'd done anything wrong with that smile on his lips, but one look at the bruise on his temple or the cuts on his knuckles would make you think twice.

He tugged me along, one hand held my bag hostage and the other held onto my elbow as we exited into the dimly lit hallway. It was around 3pm and the sun was still up, casting bright light into the school, yet this hallway was dark from shadows that crept in from behind the lockers and towered across the floor. The lack of windows in this part of the hallway did nothing to help matters.

Billy's normally bright eyes looked dark.

"What do you want?" I whispered as I shrugged out of the hold he had on my elbow.

"I um-" His eyes darted around, before they settled on mine. "It's about the other day."

"What about the other day?" I tilted my head.

"Well, uh- I just-"

"Can I have my bag back?" I interrupted.

"I need to say something first." He held a hand between us, ready in case I tried to go for my bag.

"What is it then?" I said. "Tell me."

He gaped like a fish as he searched for words.

I huffed. I reached for my bag, but he brought his arm back, so it was out of my reach.

"Hargrove!"

"Let me talk!" He said.

I scoffed as I turned and stood with my back to him.

"I haven't forgiven you, y'know." I whispered. "For what you said at the party..."

"That's what I'm trying to explain." I felt his voice hit my back. He must've moved closer to me without me noticing.

"Huh?" I asked, now conscious of how close he was.

"Why I said what I said." He said, voice rumbling. "I know it was wrong."

"I'm glad you know right from wrong." I shook my head. "Can I have my bag back now?"

"I just-" He sighed. The hair on my neck rose as his breath hit the skin there.

"Just what?" I asked, voice sounding more hopeless than I thought I was capable of sounding.

"I'm trying to say something." He said, exasperated.

"Then say it." I said, turning and catching his eyes, not letting him look away.

"I knew it would hurt you the most." The words shot out from him.

I stared at him. He broke and looked away.

"I've been through similar stuff." He blinked twice as he turned his head to face away from me so that he was looking toward the end of the corridor where the doors stood waiting for someone to exit them. I wondered if he wanted to leave, to escape the words he was about to form.

"...My mom... she uh... offed herself too." He rolled my bag strap between his fingers and I starred at it, transfixed by it. "It sucks. And I know how much it sucks to have someone leave you... like they don't even care about you. So, I'm..."

He took in a shaky breath.

"...I'm sorry, Clare." He said.

"...Can I have my bag back?" I sniffed as I tried to ignore how my voice had cracked and how my lower lip trembled.

He gave it back to me, holding it out gently as my arms wrapped around it. Before I could register it, he started heading down the corridor. Each step took him further from me.

A warm tear rolled from my eye.

"Wait!" I called, voice rasping.

He stopped but didn't face me.

I took cautious steps to him, each step lighter than the next. Soon I was behind him. I dropped my bag to the floor and pressed my nose to his back. I heard him sniff. My arms wrapped around him from behind, my hands came to intertwine with each other over his stomach. He reached up to hold both of my hands in one of his. I could feel his heart beat against my cheek, each thud as steady as the tide.

...

I'm sorry it's so short...

Someone asked when this was set so I wanted to clarify that chapter 1 starts on Halloween during season 2. Then we skip over the main events of season 2 (which Clare did take part in – you can PM me or review if you want to find out what she did) and then we meet Clare and Billy in lab class. So, it's kind of set during season 2. But it's in the dead part of the season where nothing happens until we see the kids at the snow ball (which I will include at some point).

So, what did you guys think of Billy's apology? Good? Bad? Too soon?

15. Thorns

Hey everyone! I'm really sorry this took so long. I'm trying to sort out the plot of the story and straighten things out whilst not making it convoluted.

And I am so thankful for all of the support I've had so far! It's really amazing to find out that people like this story. Thank you all for reviewing or favouriting or following.

I hope you all enjoy this one!

Chapter 15: Thorns

Monday 3rd December 1984

Billy didn't talk about his mom. I didn't ask, not wanting to go too far or say something wrong. So, as we sat in in his car with him driving just above the speed limit to my house, I began to tell him about Hannah. I told him how we'd met in kindergarten and she'd somehow managed to get blue paint on her nose. She'd cried when I couldn't wash it off in the bathroom and said her mom would kill her for getting so messy on the first day. I told him other things too. But I never once dared to speak of her suicide or what I thought led her to it.

We'd arrived at my place – Steve wasn't here, he told me he was going to hang out with some girl after school – and looted my parents liquor cabinet. Well, when I said 'looted' I meant we took one bottle from the very back. Mom and dad were hardly here anymore, now that Steve was over eighteen they'd decided to go on longer trips, so a missing bottle would hardly register with them.

I'd handed the bottle along with a bottle opener to Billy – who seemed both disgusted yet baffled by the high ceilings and modern art along the walls – before I'd gotten two glasses from the kitchen. I pulled Billy by the elbow up the stairs and into my room.

"They're dead." Billy said.

For a moment I wasn't sure who he was talking about, but I followed his gaze to the decaying roses on my bedside table that hovered over the phone in a crystal vase. They were no longer crimson, instead greying and dead, like Billy had pointed out, yet despite this the roses had a haunting beauty about them. These were the roses I'd picked out for Steve so that he could give them to Nancy to apologise after the argument they'd had on Halloween. But things with the lab had gotten in the way and I'd gotten dragged into it. The flowers were forgotten in the backseat of Steve's car, parched and in need of water and light. The next day, I found the bouquet and adopted them.

"I guess they are." I said. I put the glasses down before I picked the roses up and placed them in the trash can by the door.

Billy opened the bottle.

"Let it breath, right? Like they say in the movies." I said, awkwardly smiling at him as I walked to the centre of the room.

"It's not wine." He smirked.

"And?"

"And you're supposed to let *wine* breath, not whiskey." The smirk turned into a smile.

"You are?"

He nodded slowly.

"...Oh."

He laughed and my cheeks heated from embarrassment. I felt like such an idiot.

"Gimme the glasses." He said, gesturing with his hand for them.

Once he had them, he set them down on the desk and poured the whiskey. I eyed the grim box which sat in the centre of the desk, weary of it being only inches from him. I imagined the box opening at any moment and swallowing him whole.

"You're not much of drinker then?" He asked.

"I drink." I said. He glanced at me, raising an eyebrow in disbelief.
"Sometimes."

He handed me the glass as he chuckled, the low laugh sent a shiver through me and warmed my stomach. I sat on my bed and tried not to rub my thighs together. I was wearing a dress today. It would be easy for him to lift it.

"So..." I began, distracting myself from the tingle between my thighs.

He scratched at his chin and I heard the soft scrape of short nails against stubble.

"You need a shave." I said.

"Oh, really?" He asked with a playful smile tugging at his lips.

"Yeah, don't want you to look like a mountain man any time soon." I said, playful.

"Pfft. Mountain man?" His eyebrows raised. "It's only been a day since I last shaved."

"A day?" I said, faking my astonishment. "But you're so hairy."

"Yeah well, I'm a man." He said, holding both hands up. "Get used to it."

A man.

I'd never even realised it. There was something so odd, so sensual about him being *a man* and not a boy. He wasn't one of the numerous boys I'd had crushes on when I was younger. He was a man. And that fact made me feel like a woman. We were opposites that fit together like puzzle pieces.

He took a seat next to me on the bed and I studied his face.

"...It's healing nicely." I gestured to the butterfly bruise his father had given him with my glass. It was a dusty brown beginning to fade

seamlessly into his tanned skin.

"Oh... yeah, I guess." He shrugged before taking a sip. "It'll be gone soon. The ones on my ribs wont. They're gonna be here awhile."

"I meant what I said, y'know." I said, brow creased. "When you slept over. You- we can tell Hopper. Tell someone about..."

"...I can't." He starred at the floor.

I placed my glass on the bedside table before I scooted closer to him. I pressed a delicate kiss to his temple. The skin I found was smooth and warm. I lay my head on his shoulder and breathed in the musky scent.

"I'm sorry for bringing it up." I whispered next to his ear. "I just... I still care about you. In *that* way. Like how I imagine a... uh... girlfriend would care about her boyfriend."

I closed my eyes, tensing for a rebuffal.

"I care about you too." He whispered.

My eyes open as I lifted my head to look at him. His smile was small and content. His eyes calm. He cared about me.

I pressed my lips to his, gentle and wet. It was a sweet kiss, one that spoke of things to come. We pulled away, eyes still closed and lips lightly tingling as we lent our foreheads against each other's.

"You know, I should apologise more often." He murmured.

"Oh yeah?" I pulled back from him, eyes assessing his. "Well, I know just who to apologise to."

"Who?" He asked.

"Promise you won't act like a complete dick when I suggest names-"

"Max, right?" He said, reading my mind. "And your brother. And those kids Max hangs out with."

I nodded. "And Jonathan."

His face wrinkled. "Why him?"

"You did act like a complete jerk to him for no reason."

"No reason'?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Did you think he was going to make a move on me or something? Because I already told you there's no chance in hell of that ever happening. Jonathan's like another brother to me. I grew up with him."

"Okay. Fine." He rubbed at his eyes. "That's a lot of apologies."

I laughed as my body plopped flat down onto the bed. The bed moved as Billy crawled above me until his face was above mine, his hands either side of my neck as they held his body up. He smelt of cigarettes and sweat. Whiskey was added to the mix, creating an intoxicating masculine scent.

"You have a lot of grovelling ahead of you." I said.

He rolled his eyes from above me. "How about we sweeten the deal some, huh?"

I raised my brows in question.

"For every apology, I get a kiss." He said.

"For every apology *accepted*." I corrected. "You can't just say you're sorry and expect a kiss from me, 'kay? You have to earn it."

"Why are you always so difficult?" He asked.

I smiled up at him.

"I guess I've already earned one." He said.

"How so?"

"You accepted my apology earlier. Remember, dumbie?"

"Don't call me a d-" I began but was cut off as his lips covered mine.

He deepened the kiss as his hips nestled between my thighs. The denim was rough against my smooth flesh. His belt buckle dug into me as he rocked his hips into mine. He sent shocks of pleasure running through me.

Throat burning for oxygen, I broke away from his kiss. He carried on down my neck, kissing and licking the sensitive places. I gasped when he licked a soft spot on the underside of my jaw. It sent tingles down my spine and to my stomach.

His hands snaked along my thigh before it tugged at my panties.

A breeze blew across us from my window then, sending a different kind of tingle down my spine. It sobered me and raised the hairs on my arms.

"We can't." I leant further back onto my pillow in an effort to distance myself, but he just followed me, his wet and skilled tongue never parting from my flesh.

"Hmm?" He mumbled into my neck, carrying on nipping and sucking on parts of my flesh.

"We can't do this." I said.

"Why not?" I could feel his frown against my neck before his tongue darted out again.

I struggled to get my next few words out.

"I'm serious, Billy." I said, trying to sound firm in my resolve.

Truthfully, I knew being intimate again with him would be... well, he'd be like the first time in the showers; skilled and practiced yet calm and patient as he told me what to do. He'd be a kind lover. Despite all the walls he put up around everyone – even me – he was different than who he pretended to be. It was like my fake smiles in family photos; a front put up to protect myself.

As kind as I knew he'd be for my first time, I couldn't bring myself to

let him. There were many reasons – excuses really – for not having sex with Billy. I was scared. I wasn't at all ready for that. We barely knew each other. We often argued. He had a shit ton of baggage and so did I. I was intimidated by his extensive experience. And embarrassed by my lack of it. And Steve would probably be home soon.

"We can't do this." I put my hand on his shoulder, an indication for him to sit up.

He pulled back, and leant on his elbows above me, his face inches from my own. I studied the patterns and curved lines in his iris's and felt my stomach stir with anticipation as I realised that his pupils had dilated in lust.

I was close enough to see small silver scars here and there. A depressing part of my mind was certain of where they had come from; his father. And if they hadn't come from him, it had likely been from his many fights. His aggressive behaviour, along with the scars (on both the inside and out) were the long-lasting effects from his upbringing. I imagined a small blonde boy, with a cut above his brow. How unbearable it was to picture Billy in that way. The girl inside me wept for that boy. It wept for the Billy that he could have been; someone with a normal father, or at least one who didn't beat him, who didn't strike fear into Billy's being. I imagined how things would have changed then, maybe when they moved to Hawkins and Billy would've been a completely different person. Un-marred and fearless. Maybe we would've ended up together, in an actual relationship and not whatever the hell this was. Or maybe they would've never even moved in the first place. I'd asked Max about why they had moved from California once, but her response was patchy at best and almost sounded rehearsed. But, I knew it had something to do with Billy and his father – like moving here was a punishment, but a punishment for what exactly?

If they hadn't moved though, we would've never met. A selfish part of me realised that everything that had happened so far to Billy – including the abuse – had brought him to me. And I didn't want to let go of him. I wouldn't let go. I knew his secrets now; there was no turning back; no pretending like it never happened; and there was no chance at Billy's childhood being un-marred by his asshole father.

There was no way I was letting go of him now. I just hoped he felt the same about me. Again, I was selfish to want him to want me in the same intense way I felt I needed him. I felt *tethered* to him. He drew me in like a moth to the flame.

"Why not?" His low voice came out in a rasp that tickled my flesh. His expression was one of frustration mixed with confusion. Had any girl ever refused Billy's attentions before?

"Because..." I started, almost lost for words. I went with the first thing I could think up. "For one, we're not even dating. Like boyfriend/girlfriend stuff."

"That didn't matter in the locker room." He said, his eyes slightly narrowing. "...Or in the park."

"You..." I struggle to find words. "In the locker room, you caught me off-guard! And I didn't really know what you were going to do! It just felt too good to stop..."

I cut myself off. I could tell his ego was peaking as was evident in the omnipotent smirk that was spreading across his face as slow and silky as heated honey.

"We can just make out for the moment." I raised my eyebrow before my next statement. "No touchy-feely stuff."

He raised an eyebrow at me.

"Okay?" I asked, voice lightly trembled.

"Sounds good, Princess."

"Good." I firmly said with a nod.

A moment passed between us and then he leant forward to nuzzle the skin of my neck. His tongue came out to trace patterns on the skin there. His tongue flattened as he licked from the hollow of my neck, along my jawline and to the underside of ear. He paused then, his warm breath tickling the wet trail he'd left. He pressed his bruised temple to my untouched one. We seemed to lay like this forever, his calming weight above me, his hot skin warming my face. I played

with his hair as my eyes drifted shut.

"Do you want to..." He said, his face still hidden from view. "We could still... y'know."

"Y'know'? Am I supposed to know?" I asked.

"I meant we can... if you want to..."

"I just said I'm not having sex with you." I said.

"Oh my god! I know!" He took a breath before leaning above me and looking into my eyes. I was shocked with the intensity of his gaze. "You said that we're not dating. Do you want to *date*? Be my girlfriend?"

There was a feeling of cold dread at first, a feeling that this could perhaps never work. But the dread I felt was mixed with hope. There was a hope in me that wrapped its arms around my heart and didn't want to let go.

"Well?" He said, his eyebrows raising.

"I'd love to." I murmured, while I tried to contain my grin.

I caught a glimpse of his smile before he pressed his lips firmly to mine. His smile softened as his lips and tongue began to play with my own. My chest felt light, as if I were filled with helium and the soft weight of Billy was the only thing keeping me from floating away.

I broke away slightly to speak.

His lips were still against mine as I spoke; "If we married that would make you a Prince."

For a second, my heart ceased to beat. I lay frozen and awkward as I realised that I had brought up *marriage*. Not even a full two minutes had passed between us since he's asked to be my boyfriend, and I was talking about marriage? I could only inwardly face palm as I hoped that Billy wouldn't run for the hills.

But the unexpected happened; he smirked against my lips as he said

with confidence; "I'm already a king. It's *you* who'd be elevated. You'd be a queen."

I sniggered as I pressed my lips to his. I raked my hands in hair, clawed at his shoulders, ran them along his back. I was transfixed by the feel of his tight muscles moving under my hands. I slid my hands underneath his clothes and felt hot flesh under my fingers. Our mouths parted, and I took this opportunity to speak once more.

"If I was a queen, maybe you'd listen to me once in a while." I smirked, though my smirk was nowhere near as practiced and polished as his.

"I do listen to you." He whined as he narrowed his eyes at me.

"Sure, you do." I purred as I grabbed onto his shoulders, pulling him back down to me.

"I do." He gripped my sides which made me squirm. His eyes went from playful to cunning in an instant as he gripped my sides once more.

I gasped and rolled as he tickled me. I begged him to stop but his fingers didn't cease their movements. I finally managed to reach up to pay him back but when my hands tickled his sides he didn't move.

"I'm not ticklish." He paused torturing me as he smirked. "Nice try though."

I picked up my fluffy pillow and whacked his face with it. He sat back in shock. I hit him again, this time it was more aimed toward his chest. As I struck, he grabbed the pillow, using my hold on it to bring me closer to him. We mirrored each other as we kneeled on my bed, pillow clutched in both our hands between our chests.

"Clare?" I heard from the hallway. My eyes grew large and my blood froze.

"Just a sec, Steve!" I shouted.

"Clare?" I heard a knock on my door.

"Where do I go?" Billy whispered, eyes wide.

"Under the bed!" I whispered back. "Quick! Quick!"

I stood and smoothed out the sheets as Billy scrambled under my bed. As soon as he was under I went over to my door, pulling it open.

"Hey." I said, hoping he wouldn't see how flushed my cheeks were.

"I just got back." Steve said. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." I left my door open as I went and sat on the window seat.

He walked into my room, hands on his hips as he glanced at the bed. I really hoped he didn't see the two glasses on the bedside table or the way the pillow had creased. My heart jumped in my chest as he sat on the bed. Steve was only inches from Billy now. From where I was sat I could see Billy's boots and for a single second I thought about how gross it was that his boots had been on my bed. *Wow, I thought idly, I really was a prissy princess.*

"You should really shut that, you know." He said as he gestured to the window. The light draft sent shivers down my spine which felt oddly like when Billy's fingers would trail up and down my skin. "It's freezing in here."

I leant back onto the pane, closing it with my back.

"How'd things go with that girl?" I asked, tucking my legs under me.

"The *date* went well." He said as a dopey smile took hold of his face.

"Date?!" I said, eyebrows raised as my smile dropped.

"What?" He said. "Aren't you supposed to be happy for me?"

"Yeah, I am. Of course, I am." I said. "It's just that it's so soon after Nancy. I thought you were really broken up about her."

"Yeah I was. But not anymore." He shook his head, not doing a good job of convincing me.

"Tell me who she is then." I smiled, coyly.

"Judy." He said.

"As in Judy Holland?"

"Yep." He nodded enthusiastically, vigorously.

"Holy shit." I scoffed. "But isn't she friends with Tommy and Carol?"

"She used to be for a while." He shrugged. "But she's not like them."

I raised my eyebrows, incredulous.

"Okay! Yeah, she's a bit... *mean* sometimes but I really like her. She's... different from..."

"From Nancy?"

"...from everyone else in this town."

"I hope it works out then." I nodded. "Just please don't start hanging out with Tommy and Carol again just because she does."

"Only if you stop hanging out with Hargrove." He said. I froze and wondered what Billy would think of that. Steve was teasing but I could feel the hint of a threat hidden beneath his words.

"Ha. Real funny, Steve." I faked a cheesy grin.

Steve's eyes caught something. He pointed to the trash can and asked, "Why throw out those? Are they from Hargrove?"

I looked to the trash can and through the metal wiring I could see them. Blood red petals, no longer grey. No longer dead.

"Clare?" Steve clicked his fingers.

"What?"

"I'm uh, going to bed now." He said as he stood from my bed, forehead creased. "Wait, *did* he get you those flowers?"

I didn't answer. The shock had frozen my vocal chords.

"Clare?"

"No." I said, eyes still focused on the petals.

"Look, I'm your big brother." He said after a pause. "I'm allowed to worry. Just don't be afraid to come to me about anything, okay? Especially if it involves that dickhead."

I nodded. I felt almost guilty with the stressed face that Steve was making. *Not guilty enough to tell the truth though*, I thought.

"Night, Steve." I said softly.

"Goodnight, Clare." He muttered on his way out of my room.

My eyes focussed on the door, listening to Steve walk down the hallway, his steps muffled by his socks. I heard his door shut. Then silence filled the space. Billy began to climb out from under the bed, but my eyes still focussed on my door.

I heard him walk to the trash. He stopped and leant down to it before standing up again. He brought up a single red rose before he spoke.

"They're not dead."

Rain patted onto the window pane.

"How...?" He asked, the rose still firm in his grasp as he turned to me.

"I'm not sure." I said, not having any answers.

I stood and walked to him before I took the rose from his hand. I gasped, and the rose fell to the floor. One of its thorns had stabbed into me, taken some of my life force with it in the form of a thick red dot of blood. Billy grasped at my wrist and looked at the gathering of blood on the second knuckle of my index finger. He raised it to his mouth and sucked.

"Gross." I said, lip furled yet I felt my thighs as they rubbed together.

"Magic spit." He said as my finger exited his mouth.

He traced along the lines on my palm with calloused fingertips.

"Those roses were dead. We didn't imagine it." He almost whispered.

I said nothing, instead I let the silence stretch on for a moment.

"...then..." He began before he let go of my hand. It dropped to my side, still tingling as if his fingertips were still ghosting along my flesh. "...you touched them."

I said nothing. I looked to his neck, studying his bobbing Adams apple which was easier than watching the cogs turn in his head.

"That night we found the dog. He must've been dead. I was sure he was. No pulse. Nothing. But then you smoothed him- you touched him..." He trailed off and I could practically feel the crack of electric when I had touched the dog that night.

"My nose bled." *Like Eleven.*

(19th November 1984)

"Where's the vets in this town?" Hargrove glanced up at me in question before returning his gaze to the poor animal.

"Across town." I said. "I'll direct you."

Billy nodded firmly before shutting the boot door, careful not to shake the dog too much when he shut it. I began to feel a trickle run down from my nostril to my upper lip. I covered my face with my hand as I turned away from Hargrove.

"What's wrong?" He asked, nonplussed.

"Nothing." I said, back still facing him.

"If it's nothing then c'mon and get in the car already." He said before reaching out and grabbing my shoulder.

"I'm bleeding!" I said as I flinched away from his touch.

He eyed the place my hand was covering.

"Nosebleed, huh?" He said as he stepped toward me. I stepped away from him, not wanting him to touch me anymore tonight. "It's alright. I've got some experience with nose bleeds."

He inched toward me but this time I didn't move. I believed he wanted to help me – help me like the dog he'd only moments ago placed in the boot of his car.

"Head forward." He said as he lightly pushed the back of my head downward. "Pinch by here." He said as he placed my fingers just under the bony part of my nose.

"There's some tissue in my car." He said as he walked around to his side of the car. "C'mon."

"You think your nosebleed was connected?" He asked.

"It could be. But then why didn't I bleed this time then?" I said as I gestured to the rose by our feet. "If it's connected then why did I bleed then and not now?"

"I guess bringing a dog back would be a lot harder than a bunch of flowers." He said. My breath caught in my throat. He was suggesting... or at least I thought he was suggesting that I had been the reason the flowers were red again. He thought I was the reason why the dog hadn't stayed dead that night.

"Well, the dog's dead now so..." I ignored him.

"Maybe it's temporary." He said.

"Oh! Yes, of course, it must be temporary." I said, voice laced with sarcasm as I threw my hands up.

He scoffed.

I rolled my eyes.

"This is..." He shook his head. "... fucking crazy. This is fucking fucked up. It's- I mean, we're talking about fucking resurrection. It's

like you're Jesus or Frankenstein. It's too much."

"Well, how do you think I feel?" I said, eyes stinging and nose tingling. "You said it yourself, I'm fucking Frankenstein. I'm the freaking cure to *death* apparently! Do you know how many times I could've- how many people I could've saved? Hannah..."

Billy stepped forward.

"It's not true." I shook my head as a small sob escaped me. "I'm not some freak with powers... I'm not."

Billy wrapped his arms around me and I burrowed my head into the juncture where his shoulder met his neck. He shushed me and rubbed at my back as I whimpered into his flesh. Outside, the silver rain kept falling.

...

His deep even breaths tickled the back of my neck and told me that he'd fallen asleep. I hadn't been able to sleep despite the dry tiredness I felt, instead I had stared at my clock watching as the numbers went by, taking us later into the night. We lay in the darkness – like the last time Billy had slept here – and for once, I wasn't afraid. Whether this lack of fear came from shock of my revelations or from the way Billy's protective arm lay over my waist I wasn't completely sure.

I glanced over to the window with stiff eyes. All I could see and hear was the heavy rain spotting and running down the glass. It was closed, and I missed the soothing breeze it normally gave me at night. I slowly removed myself from Billy's tired embrace and walked over to open it. I welcomed the cold as it soothingly raised the hairs on my arms.

I sat on the window seat and watched as Billy's chest rose and fell evenly.

How many times had Hannah sat where I was and looked at me as I sat on my bed? If I could bring the dog back, how hard would it be to bring her back too?

If. And it was a big if. I still didn't really believe that I had a power of

some sort. It was batshit crazy. But I'd seen batshit before. I'd seen demodogs and a creepy little girl who'd thrown one of those monsters with her mind. I'd been to the upside down. Nothing should've fazed me after that.

I stared at the rose that still lay on my floor, petals burgundy as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, and wanted to escape everything. I wanted nothing to do with the lab or other worlds. I didn't want death and life to circle over my head in an endless circuit.

It's simple really: I either have powers or I don't. There is one way to test it, I thought. Touch something dead and see if it starts breathing.

I dressed, went downstairs and put my yellow raincoat on over my pjs before I walked out into the downpour. Soon, I'd make to the cemetery where Hannah was buried.

...

This chapter was so hard to write! I just wasn't sure how they would both react so there were a few drafts that all went in different directions and I hoped I stuck with the right one.

I hope you all enjoyed it! Please leave a review. It makes me write faster – not even a lie, it really does.

16. Already Dead

Sorry for taking so long! Writers block nearly destroyed me.

Also, I've been editing past chapters. So, if anyone ever revisits this story, there might be some hidden stuff there that I forgot to write about the first time (coz I'm an idiot) but nothing too important.

Hope you enjoy!

...

Chapter 16: Dead Already

Rushing rain ran along the edges of the pavement and swirled into storm drains before vanishing into the empty blackness of the sewers. I trod along the street, only a few houses down from where mine stood, and shivered as grey rainwater splashed up my bare legs with every step I took and raised goosebumps along my body. I passed by one of the sewer grates and thought of how the wet reddish leaves could pass for entrails under the light of the moon.

I passed Oldham and Stockburn, a crossroads that if you went right would take you further into town or if you went left, would take you to the edge of Hawkins. I went left, following this path would take me to the cemetery. The road lay alongside the forest, which normally housed many loud creatures but tonight they all seemed to be silenced by the storm. A gust of wet wind brushed over the treeline which made rain fall heavy from the leaves as they swayed. My hood from flew from my head but I didn't care, I was instead more focused on the journey ahead.

Bringing back Hannah was stupid, I knew that. But I had to. If there was a chance I could talk to her again, or make her laugh or see her smile... I had to bring her back. I need my friend back.

I wiggled my toes in-between steps and cursed that I had worn gym shoes instead of my wellingtons. The pale grey clouds swirled overhead like the miniature whirlpools by the entrances of storm

drains.

A low hum broke through the sound barrier the rainfall had created. I turned my head and was blinded by headlights. Rain streaked in front of the car and each drop of rain created small black silhouettes which ghosted past the white headlights. I raised a hand to cover my eyes and watched as it pulled up to me.

"The fuck?" I whispered to myself as the window rolled down.

"Get in." Billy told me.

I shook my head and my lower lip trembled.

"Clare, come on." He said, firmly.

"No." I turned from the car and carried on walking.

I heard the click of his door as it opened and soon enough he was beside me. His hand tugged mine and forced me to holt.

"Clare, come on." He said.

"No!" I shouted, ignoring how my voice cracked.

"You're going to the cemetery, right?"

"Of course I am."

"For Hannah?" He asked.

"Yes." I wrenched myself out of his grasp, stomping forward.

"Clare, stop." He ran ahead of me and blocked my path.

"If you really do have abilities or a power or whatever, using it like this is probably not the best idea." He said.

"If I do have a power, then I can save her." I said. If given the chance to bring a loved one back, wouldn't you do it? If you just sat back and did nothing, then it would become your fault. If you let something horrible continue when you have the power to stop it, then it becomes your *responsibility*.

"Jesus, you must be freezing." He said as he removed his jacket, leaving him in only the striped pyjamas I'd given him (they were the same ones I'd given him last time he'd slept over). He pulled me close before wrapping the denim around me and locking me in his arms, not letting go. I pushed my hands into his chest, only vaguely registering that his flesh was still healing from what his father had done.

"Get off me!" I shouted. "I'm going to her. I'm going!"

"You can't bring her back, Clare." He said, not letting go of me.

"But I-" Warm rain ran along my cheeks before I noticed that it was tears. "I can save her. I can- it's my fault she's there and not here."

"It's not your fault." He said as he brought me close. He rubbed at my back before he repeated himself. "It's not your fault." He said into my hair. He said it a few more times as if it were a chant – a prayer almost.

"I can save her." I whimpered into his throat.

"But you're not supposed to." He said as he brushed a slick strand of hair from my forehead. "She's dead. She wanted to die."

"But she-"

"You shouldn't mess with things like this. Say you do bring her back, she's just gonna die again. Like the dog."

"Well, I'll keep bringing her back again and again if I have to." I said.

"Where does it end though?" He asked. "When your mom and dad die are you gonna bring them back too? How about when Steve's gone, huh? Or when I die?"

I shook my head as my eyes stung. Tears streak along my face and mixed with rain. I rubbed my cheek with numb fingers.

"I swear to God, Clare, bringing her back is crazy!" He rasped as he glared down at me. "If you wanna test this out, then just wait for the roses to die and touch them again."

Billy wouldn't change his mind, I knew how stubborn he could be.

"Fuck." I said, not being able to deny the logic of his plan. It was much easier than digging up Hannah – and much less heart wrecking if it failed. Imagine if I'd touched Hannah, expecting her to come back, only for her not to. I'd be crushed. Also, if I was found digging up her grave, I knew I'd be sent back to the hospital and there was no way I was ever willingly going back.

"Fine." I said, agitated.

"Good." Billy said, stern.

I glared at him. "But if I'm able to bring the roses back again then I'm bringing her back too."

"No, you're not."

"What? Why?" I asked.

"Because it's dumb!" He said, plainly. "Going out in the rain in nothing but a dress and a thin raincoat is dumb. Resurrecting your friend is dumb. Your whole plan was dumb."

"Fuck off." I finally said, malice dripping from my words.

"You fuck off." He said. "If you could bring her back, then why would you want to?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I asked.

"No, I'm not." He said. "What were you going to do when she came back? You can't tell people she's alive. They won't believe you unless they see her and when they do see her, there's no doubt that everyone will know you have some sort of power. Everyone and their dead mother will want what you can do. Before long, everyone will be asking if they can have their dead relatives back. Or maybe the government will step in, take you to a top-secret lab somewhere and run tests." He took a moment to scoff and shake his head. "The whole situation's fucked."

"But I miss her..." I said, voice small.

"You'll get over it." He said, voice harsh.

I sniffed as I wrenched myself away from his body in disgust.

"Look," Billy started. "I just meant that..." He inhaled and held the breath for a second before he let it escape his lungs. "You shouldn't bring people back from the dead. It would cause more problems than it would fix."

"What do you know?" I asked, childish.

"I know that she committed suicide!" He said. "She wasn't happy here. She didn't want to live anymore. So, she took all of her shitty sleeping pills and ended it."

"...Hannah didn't OD." I said and watched as Billy's face morphed into sorrow; eyebrows furrowing, lower lip trembling.

He took in a shaky breath.

It was his mother he had been talking about.

...

As if in a haze, we'd made it to his car, climbed inside and shut our doors on the growing storm. I shivered in my wet clothes and looked out of the window and saw signs and houses whiz by. Billy was driving but I didn't know where he was going, he didn't turn the corner to my house a few miles ago, so I was left to wonder.

"Hey, Billy?"

"Yeah?" He answered as we turned a corner.

"Where're we going?"

"Uh, I found this place a few weeks back." He said. "You probably know it; the quarry."

"I know it." I said as I thought about how the lab had planted Will's fake body there. "Why there?"

"It's quiet," He shrugged and looked as if he was debating whether to continue speaking. He didn't, instead clammed up and closed his mouth into a firm line.

"How'd you wake up, anyway?" I asked. "When I left, you were still storing."

"I snore?" His forehead wrinkled as he looked at me.

I nodded.

"Great." He said, grumpily although I knew he was just playing. "I was shivering so much I woke up. You left the window open."

"Oh yeah. I'm sorry about that."

He didn't reply. Silence took over. The only noises came from the Camaro's engine and rain which battered against the windows.

"How'd you know where I was?" I asked after a moment.

"With everything that happened, and what you told me earlier about Hannah, I guessed you were heading to the cemetery."

"How'd you know the way to the cemetery?" I sniffed. "You're new to town right, so how?"

"I've been there a couple times." He said.

"Why?" I asked as I pictured Billy strolling around the tombstones for some bizarre reason.

"What is this? Twenty-one questions or some shit?"

I gave him a pointed look.

"That's where I get my stuff from." He admitted.

"Stuff?" I said with a furrowed brow.

"Yeah... weed." He said before shrugging.

I blinked, unable to think for a whole second.

"You smoke weed?" I said, only lightly shocked.

"Only at parties." He murmured.

"Actually, I'm not even surprised." I said, nonplussed. "But do people really deal drugs in the cemetery? Talk about a lack of respect for the dead."

Hypocritical much? I asked myself. I was about to try and bring Hannah back, something that was very much about going against resting in peace. I frowned.

I'd heard weed was good for relaxing and that's what I needed right then. I needed something to remove me from Hawkins for a few brief moments – something that wasn't typical of me; something rebellious and *normal*.

"Can we smoke some?" I asked.

"You wanna smoke weed?" He said as his head whipped to face me. His wide eyes and raised eyebrows were comical.

"Can we?" I tried again.

"Uh... I'm not sur-"

"Please?"

...

Each rain drop hazed into focus as it rushed down the window pane like tears down smooth infant cheeks.

Billy had driven us to the quarry in silence after he'd agreed to my proposal. He found a place to park and had gotten the drugs from his glove compartment. He'd rolled it out and lit it with his Zippo before giving it to me. He'd then sat back against his chair and let his eyes drift shut. His face completely evened out and became serene – an expression which so rarely crossed his features.

After the blunt was a quarter smoked – and I couldn't believe I'd managed to smoke even that much – it started to seem as though

Billy had fallen asleep.

"Hey, Billy?" I whispered.

Smiling to myself, I leant over, removed the blunt from my mouth as I did so, and carefully placed a kiss on his clear cheek bone. His skin was soft and supple as sin as my lips graced it. I went back to my chair trying to be quiet despite the squeaking of the leather seat.

I watched him with hopeless smile on my face.

"That was nice." He spoke after a few seconds had passed.

"You were awake?" I asked, eyes wide as the smile fell.

"Yeah." He said as his eyes opened and he sat up.

"Oh." I felt my cheeks redden as I slumped into the chair.

"You enjoying that?" Billy asked with a humoured smile as he gestured to the blunt.

"It's actually very calming." I sighed before holding the blunt out for him. "You sure you don't want any?"

"Uh, I'll pass. I still have to drive us back." He said.

"That's very, um, responsible of you." I sat up in my chair as I narrowed my eyes at him. "Are you the real Billy or has Hawkins lab cloned someone else?" The words left my lips before my mind could even catch up with their meaning. My mouth opened and dried up before Billy spoke.

"Hawkins lab?" He said, leaning forward slightly. "Aren't they the place that killed that girl? It was on the news the other night. You heard they cloned someone?"

"Yeah... well..." I struggled for words.

"That was on the news, right?" He said, brow creased.

"No." I slurred. "I mean, yes! Yeah, it was. Ha, silly me."

"What aren't you telling me?" His eyes narrowed.

Billy – along with myself – had already found out some pretty weird shit tonight so maybe telling him about Will would be okay. I blamed the weed for making my lips so loose that night.

"They never actually cloned someone." I said. "They just made the body."

"What?" He asked.

"Yep. And then they tossed it here; in the quarry to make it looked like he drowned."

Billy's face paled. "...drowned?

"It was Will Byers." I nodded as I placed the blunt between my lips and took another drag. "That's why everyone calls him 'Zombie-boy'!" I exhaled. "Because everyone thought he was dead. It was horrible. There was even a funeral."

"They lied and said he *drowned*?" He darkly gritted out the last word.

I nodded as I watched the smoke dance from my lungs.

He took a shaky breath.

"Are you okay?" I said as I leant toward him.

"My sister... not Max. My real sister, she uh... never mind." He shook his head as if to shake off bad thoughts.

He had a sister? Had she died like everyone assumed Will did? I could almost imagine a bond like that being severed. The pain. Anger. All-consuming guilt. Losing my brother would crush me.

"...she drowned?" I asked as I removed the blunt from my lips. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked. I shouldn't have even started talking about Will or the lab... it just came out."

Billy didn't reply, instead he turned his head to stare menacingly out of the windshield.

"You don't have to tell me." I said softly, as I raised a hand toward him again, meaning to stroke damp hair away from his forehead. Before I could touch him, his hand shot out. It latched onto my wrist. Fingers white against my skin. His grip iron.

"You know how you think it's your fault Hannah's still dead?" He asked, voice low and gritty.

"... yeah." I answered, cautious.

"Well, it's my fault my sister died." He growled.

I stared at him and my eyes stung from refusing to blink. He pushed my hand toward me as he let go. Color flooded the skin on my wrist where he'd held on too tightly. I rubbed at it as my heart thudded against my ribs.

He started the car, revving the engine as he speeded from the quarry.

...

Tuesday 4th December 1984

My mouth was sandpaper and my eyes were dry pebbles that rubbed against raw eyelids when I awoke. I rolled over and felt cold sheets. Thankfully, there had been no nightmares but unfortunately Billy had not stayed the night. After he'd dropped me back to my house, I wasn't sure where he'd gone afterward. Maybe he'd gone back to his house, or maybe he'd even driven back to the quarry for the quiet it provided. I understood his need for silence; it helped me to think and I guess it helped him too.

I sat up and my eyes caught onto the single red rose on my bedside table.

Of three things I was certain; the first; the dog was dead. And I had to find a way to tell Max without upsetting her which would be impossible. The second; I could perhaps bring things back to life. In combination with the rest of my life and the supernatural happening of Hawkins, I supposed I wasn't as shocked as I should have been. The third; Billy's sister and mother were dead. The sister had drowned, and the mother had taken her own life – leaving Billy with

only his father. He'd told me no more on the subject last night, though the guilt which had seeped from his pores like sin had made it clear he still suffered the pain of their loss, as we all do when we lose someone we love.

Maybe that was why he let his dad beat him; because he believed it was his fault and he needed to be punished for it. I closed my eyes and prayed he didn't think like that. No matter what he said or who he blamed, I knew it couldn't be possible that he had anything to do with his sister's death or with anyone's death.

But then I remembered what he'd said about his mother's death.

"She died." He'd said to me.

"Sorry." I said.

"Don't be." He frowned. *"It wasn't your fault."*

I'd puzzled over what he'd said that night. Did he think that it was his own fault? Was his mother another death he felt *responsible* for? My eyes stung as I thought of all the pain he must have carried around with him for years of his life. It was no wonder he'd been shaped into a brash and aggressive person. He wasn't good by any means, but there was hope for him – I hoped that he would become a better person, and not be shaped by loss or by his father's actions. I also hoped that it wasn't too late for him to realise this about himself.

...

Queuing up in the cafeteria had always been a shitty experience topped with even shittier food. The experience was made worse knowing that this was the day where I had no one to hang out with since everyone (Steve, Jonathan, Nancy, Tammy) had second lunch period today whereas I had first. I knew Billy had lunch now too, but he was probably serving a detention for the fight with Tommy. Even if he didn't have detention, he'd most likely not be in the cafeteria, instead preferring a smoke under the bleachers. I don't think he ate at lunch – instead a cigarette filled him. *Maybe it was for the best*, I thought as I glanced down at the gruel on my tray.

"Hey, Clare." A voice came from behind.

I turned my head to find Judy Holland stood two spaces away from me. This was the girl Steve had gone on a date with last night. She was pretty with bright hazel eyes and burnt orange hair, like a sunset, so I could definitely understand how Steve liked her – she was the opposite of Nancy's brown hair and blue eyes. She was also known to be a lot meaner than Nancy which was why I felt on edge with her speaking to me.

"Come talk with me." She asked, her smile hopeful. I'd never really spoken to her before, and the only time I had was the night everything had gone down with the upside down. She'd been there too, an unlikely ally in the tunnels of the upside down. I wondered what had gone down between her and Steve since that night.

"Sure." I said as I gestured for the two people between us to go forward so that I could take their place next to Judy. "Hi." I smiled at her. "You good?"

"Apart from the food," She glanced down at soggy the vegetables laying limp on her tray. "I'm doing great. You?"

"Um," I grimaced down to what I thought was mash potato and decided that the mash was lumpier than a cheap bed at a motel. "I'm great."

"That's, well that's *great*." She said, and we laughed awkwardly as we moved along the queue. The lunch lady slapped some stiff meatloaf onto my tray, then onto Judy's. We exited the line and I looked across the cafeteria to where an empty table sat.

"Where are you sitting?" She asked, coming to stand next to me.

"I was going to go to–"

"Hi, Judy." A feminine and snide voice interrupted. I turned my head and found Carol and a bruised Tommy H sat not far from where we stood. "Interesting company." Carol commented as she sent a pointed look my way.

"Yeah," Tommy agreed, shrugging. "Why're you with her?"

"I was just going to ask if she was going to cheer practice tonight." Judy said to them, innocently. She pulled at my arm as she walked closer to them and I was powerless to avoid getting closer to Tommy and Carol.

"Why?" Tommy said. "You're not even on the team."

Judy's lips pursed.

"Oh, I get it." Carol said, smile wide and mischievous. "You're hoping for a spot on the team, right, Judy? And since Clare here hasn't been pulling her weight on the team recently, you're hoping she'll quit. That'll leave the team with one spot open just for you."

I looked at Judy and saw a sheepish expression cross her face.

"Actually, I was going to quit soon." I said. I'd been meaning to quit for a while now but had never quite mustered up enough courage to leave. I figured that now would be the best time to quit, when there was just one cheerleader (Carol) here and not fifteen of them, who would glare at me through thickly applied mascara.

"Really?" Judy's face brightened.

"Yeah," I gave her a small smile. "You can have my spot."

"Aww, well isn't that sad." Carol said, voice whiny with fake sympathy. "Clare's leaving the team." She furrowed her brow and wobbled her bottom lip at Tommy who laughed at her false sympathy. "Why're you quitting, Clare? Too much on your plate? You stressed? I'd be stressed too if my boyfriend was a psychopath."

My eyebrows raised but I stayed silent, too shocked to do or say anything.

"They're perfect for each other." Tommy joined in. "The mental patient and the psycho."

"Which is which?" Carol asked. Tommy laughed.

"Guys," Judy cuts in, voice wavering. "A little harsh, don't you think?"

"Harsh?" Carol squeals, drawing attention from tables around us. "Just look what Hargrove did to Tommy's face." She pointed at him, sending my eyes back to the cut that circled around his brow and the bruises that had exploded onto his cheek bone and temple, eerily similar to how Billy had looked after his dad had beaten him.

"Tommy's right. You and Hargrove are perfect for each other. Two little freaks in love." Carol said menacingly as she sat on the edge of her seat.

"If Billy were here, you wouldn't be saying that." I told them.

"And why's that?" Tommy said, dryly.

"Because..." I swallowed and tried to ignore my heart thumping along with my palms becoming sweaty against the plastic tray. "...both of you are too cowardly to say anything to him so you're picking on me instead."

"We're cowards?" Tommy scoffs as he points between himself and Carol. Carol rolled her eyes.

Tommy stood. He stalked over to me. I was frozen in place. People were watching us now.

"You're the coward. You're just like Steve: you run away from your problems. You ran away and hid in a hospital instead of facing your shitty life. Your friend offed herself. Your parents aren't ever home. Daddy cheats on mommy. Steve's embarrassed of you." Tommy leans over my tray and I can feel his hot breath. "Why don't you learn from that slutty friend of yours and just kill yourself already."

My eyes stung. My fingers clenched around the tray. I tightened my lips so that no one saw the bottom one tremble. I really wanted to throw my tray at Tommy's fat head, but I couldn't. I was still motionless. Paralyzed.

"Christ, Tommy." Judy said.

"What?" He stepped away from me.

"That was horrible." She said as she glared at him.

Tommy scoffed before sitting down again.

"Why are you defending her?" Carol asked Judy. "It's not like you've cared about anyone else before."

"Yeah, well I'm trying this new thing where I'm actually nice to people." Judy scowled at them. "Maybe you two should try it sometime."

They both scoffed at her words.

"Come on, Clare." Judy said to me. "Let's go sit down."

We walked over to the empty table sat in the corner of the room. I felt eyes from all around stare at me; judge me. I needed to leave. I placed my tray down onto the table and felt my waterline moisten.

"I'm going to head to the bathroom." I said.

Judy caught my eyes before I could duck my head away from her and she saw the tears that threatened to spill. Her face immediately softened with empathy and her eyes became honey.

"I'll go with you."

...

Judy had surprised me. I'd heard rumours about how horrid she was, the things she'd done and the people she'd made feel like crap. But now, as she wiped away my tears in the girls' bathroom with rough tissue and a delicate hand, I couldn't help but be sceptical of what I'd heard.

"I'm sorry about them." She shook her head. "They're complete assholes."

"I know." I whispered.

"Don't listen to anything they said." She told me as she sat atop the edge of the sink next to me.

"Aren't you friends with them?" I asked.

She paused. Her brow creased, and I wondered if she knew the answer herself.

"I'm not really friends with anyone anymore I guess." She said, eyes downcast.

"What about my brother?" I asked. "I heard good things about last night."

She gave a hopeful half-smile. "Yeah... I suppose he's a friend."

"Great." I said.

"Great." We smiled as we repeated our words from our awkward conversation in the line for lunch.

"Listen, don't tell Steve about this." I sniffed. "If he finds out then I know he'll go crazy. It'll maybe even lead to a fight with Tommy. And I don't want Steve to get hurt again."

"How can I not tell him?" She frowned. "He's your brother, he should know."

"No. He shouldn't." I shook my head. "Promise me?"

"I don't know..." She looked unsure as she slowly shook her head. "I mean, half of the school already knows probably."

"Promise me?" I said, firm. "If he doesn't find out through anyone else, then promise you won't tell him?"

Her honey eyes focused intensely on mine for a few long seconds before she dragged her gaze away and settled it on the floor.

"Okay." She said. "I promise."

...

I placed my chin on my hand as I tiredly watched the clock tick away. Two minutes remained until the end of the day and it seemed as though it were just my luck that time seemed to be going slower than normal. I wanted nothing more than to rush home so that I

could retreat into the warmth of my bedsheets, although I doubted that, if I slept at all, my dreams would be greeted by anything but ghostly little girls, tall forests and harrowing laboratories. And if that happened then I knew the smell of copper wouldn't be far behind.

I'd recovered from earlier and my eyes were no longer red. It did not look as if I had cried, yet it certainly felt like I had; the roaring headache, dry eyes and sandpaper throat were hard to ignore. Also, the shame had threatened to crush me. I couldn't believe I had cried over what Tommy had said; to kill myself. I think it was the combination of what he'd said along with the utter malice and hatred seeping from his eyes that had tipped me over the edge. And the feeling of half the cafeteria's critical eyes on me as I'd walked away hadn't been pleasant, to say the least.

The bell rang. I hurriedly packed my books away before I finally exited the class room.

As I made it to my locker, I saw Jonathan from the other end of the corridor with Nancy. I awkwardly wave at them, and I watch as Jonathan gestures for Nancy to stay put before he walked over to me.

My locker swung open and I swiftly jammed several text books in, cramming them together until there was little space left. I shut the locker just as Jonathan made it to me.

"Hey." I smile. "Why didn't Nancy come?"

"You got a second?" He asked. "It's about the photo and the news clipping."

The blood which warmed by body went cold when he spoke those words. I couldn't help but hold my breath in anticipation of what his friend had found out.

"Listen, I wasn't able to see him directly." He said as he pulled the clipping and photo from his pocket. "He's got this fancy interview in New York. He's called Murray Bauman. You might have seen him on the news."

"The guy you and Nancy gave the tape to, right?" I asked as I took

them from his outstretched hand. I ignored how my hand lightly shook before I leant back against my locker.

"Yeah. Anyway, I described the photograph to him and read the article. He said he'll definitely look into Clara Hertz. He's got tons of files on the lab, so he'll find something soon."

"Did he say anything else?" I put the clipping and the photo in my jacket pocket before I crossed my arms.

"Uh, kind of? He told me the whole MKUltra thing was set up to develop mind control techniques." He said, voice hushed. "Nothing new, I guess since we already know what Eleven can do with her mind."

I nodded.

"But he was telling me that the baby in the picture was most definitely a result of that project. Whoever it is," He looked at me with something all-knowing in his eyes. "...they have powers."

If I could bring the dead back, then there it was – more evidence to suggest that the woman in the photo had been holding me. It was hard to think about. My stomach rolled at the prospect. I couldn't possibly be someone else's daughter. I don't believe it. I can't.

...

As soon as Jonathan had left, I realized how packed the hallway was with teens rushing to their lockers, chatting with friends, laughing, smiling. *Normal*. My heart started to beat faster. My palms got sweaty. I bolted towards the exit with hardly any people by it. As the door shut behind me, a hand grasped hold of my upper arm. It dragged me to a small alcove, where a wooden bench sat, hidden under shade from the awning.

"Let go!" I said.

"Why didn't you come find me?" Billy's voice hits my ears. "I would've beaten Tommy's fucking face in."

"That's exactly why I didn't come find you." I said as I wrenched my

arm from his grip.

"Jesus Christ, Clare." He scoffed before crossing his arms. "Why the hell not?"

"Because you shouldn't have to." I fired back. "You're so aggressive all the time! You shouldn't be like that! I don't want you to turn out like..."

"Like my dad." He finished for me.

"I'm so sorry." I said after a pause.

He shakes his head in barely concealed anger as his gaze wanders over to the parking lot. His eyes focused on something and I turned my head to follow where his eyes went. They landed on Max, who was laughing with Lucas as they walked to Billy's car.

"We have to tell her about the dog." I said, and my brows creased as I watched him frown.

"I know." Billy said before he inhaled and let his breath leave. It twirled out into the frigid air and mingled with mine. Billy started to walk but before he left, I grabbed onto his hand.

"You're okay, right?" I asked as my eyes searched for any sign of sorrow in his. "After last night?"

From how his eyes had glazed over, I could tell he was thinking of his mother and sister. He blinked twice and his focus came back to me. "...I'm still pretty freaked about the roses, if that's what you meant."

"It's not." I said, voice fragile.

"I know." He said, voice barely about a whisper.

"It's okay to admit that you're not... good." I said as my thumb stroked over his knuckles and came across a few scabs from pummelling Tommy's face a few days ago.

"I know. I just don't... want to." He looked back over to Max. "C'mon, let's go talk to my little shit of a sister."

He let go of my hand and the skin there felt cold instantly. We walked out from the alcove and into the parking lot, avoiding the crowds of students waiting for parents to pick them up.

"Now's your chance to apologize to Lucas." I said with a smile.

"Now?" He asked, eyebrows raised.

"Yep."

"Fuck."

I let out a small laugh.

"Hey guys." I said as we neared them. "Billy has to say something."

They both looked to Billy with a tempered curiosity and suspicion.

"Uh..." Billy looked between them and then at me for help.

"Go on." I said softly with a warm smile.

"Okay." Billy inhaled. "Sinclair. I'm... sorry for how I... acted a few weeks ago." He looked back at me and I raised my eyebrows for him to continue. "I shouldn't be so... aggressive all the time." His eyes darted back to mine for less than a second. "Pushing you up against the wall... not- not cool."

"Are you *trying* to apologize?" Lucas said, face wrinkled.

Max let out a chortle.

"Pretty shitty apology." Max said, teasingly.

Billy scoffed and turned condemning eyes on me, to which I shrugged.

"Look, I'm sorry okay?" Billy said, his tone cutting the crap.

"I believe you." Lucas said.

Billy nodded and exhaled.

"Where's my apology?" Max crossed her arms.

"You don't get one, shitface." Billy shot back.

They continued to bicker and tease one another, and I watched with an amused smile on my face. Lucas stepped toward me and asked;

"Are they like this a lot when they're together?"

"I think so." I said, only having seen them act this way one the ride back from the vets. The vets. The dog. *I have to tell her*, I thought as I sobered up. "You're a close friend to her, right?"

"Of course." He said, voice forceful and genuine.

"I've got some bad news for her so stick around if she needs comforting." I told him.

"What is it?" Lucas asked, voice hushed.

"You'll find out in a sec." I said, grimly.

I looked back to Billy and Max who are *smiling* at each other – granted Max's smile was tight lipped and Billy's was smug, but they still counted. I hated that I had to ruin that moment.

"Billy." I said, voice tight. "Should we...?"

His face dropped and the light fled from his eyes. He nodded.

"Max, I had a phone call from the vets..." I trailed off.

"What is it?" Max asked, voice high and eyes wide. "What happened to the dog?"

"Max, the dog-" I started.

"Wasn't ours." Billy cut me off. "Uh, the owner found one of the stupid posters you made."

Max's face gave a little mow. She was crestfallen, but not as much as she would've been had Billy and I told her the truth.

Billy's eyes latched onto mine. I hoped he could see how thankful I was.

"I hope the dog's happy... wherever he is." Max said, voice saddened. "Y'know, I even had a name picked out for him."

I started to sniff as tears filled my eyes. I felt a mixture of guilt and happiness; I felt guilty that she did not know the truth, yet I couldn't help but feel truly happy that she had spared her from it.

"Are you okay, Clare?"

"Yeah, just a little sad." I said with a forced smile.

Max stepped forward and wrapped her arms around my waist, shocking me into stillness. I gathered myself and moved my arms to her shoulders. She held onto me, not caring if Billy or anyone else saw. My eyes caught onto Billy's. As I rubbed at Max's shoulders, I could tell we both had the same idea forming: to bring the dog back. Billy's eyes narrowed. **No**, he told me without moving his mouth.

"Clare?" Someone called from behind us.

My body turned, still attached to Max, and I spied Steve as he briskly walked over to us, narrowly avoiding bumping into a car on its way out of the parking lot. We all turned to face him as he reached us and Max's arm unwrapped from my waist. For a few intense seconds Steve eyed Billy with suspicion whereas Billy's eyes held only exasperated annoyance at my older brother's appearance.

I wondered if Judy had broken her promise and told Steve about Tommy earlier or had he found out through someone else, like Billy had? Or perhaps, Steve didn't know but I wasn't sure how likely that was.

"You good?" Steve asked me, eyes concerned yet still hardened, likely not wanting to show any vulnerability in front of Billy.

"Geez, are you going for big brother of the year?" Billy crossed his arms.

"Well, there's no chance of you winning, so it's worth a shot." Steve

glared at him, furling his upper lip.

Billy's grin fell into a line. There was no way that Steve could know that Billy viewed himself as guilty for his sister's death. I quickly spoke up, to appease Steve but to mostly distract Billy from his own harmful thoughts.

"Steve, I'm fine." I smiled reassuringly at him. "Don't worry."

"But..." He said before loosely pointing at me and Max. "...you two were..."

"Hugging." Lucas supplied. "People hug all the time."

Billy smirked at the kid's words.

"But... why?" Steve asked, unconvinced as he placed a hand on his hip.

Lucas rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Y'know the dog they found?" Max said.

"Yeah, what about it?" Steve shrugged his eyes landing on Max.

"The owners found it." Max said. "And Clare was sad 'cause she was gonna adopt it."

I nodded when Steve looked at me with saddened brown eyes, the same eyes that I had. We really did look alike; brown hair and eyes, pale skin freckled with moles. We even had similar nails, except mine were painted pink.

"Yeah, well that sucks." He said, looking down.

"Max, we should get going." Billy said, tone firm. "We don't wanna be late."

"Late for what, Hargrove?" Steve spoke up as he tilted his head ever so slightly.

"None of your business, Harrington." He said, chin raised.

They glared at one another for probably the hundredth time since Steve had come over here.

"Boys." I said to break the tension. They both turned their eyes to me before they looked away just as fast. It was weird how similar they were in that second.

"Steve, we should go too." I said.

"I'm gonna go too." Lucas said. "See you tomorrow, Max."

"Bye, Lucas." She replied with pink cheeks.

Billy glared at Lucas' back as he trod away to the bike rack.

"Billy," I brought his attention to me. "I'll call you later about the *thing* maybe."

"The thing?" He frowns in confusion.

The roses, idiot. I narrowed my eyes.

"Oh! That thing." He nodded. "Sure."

"What thing?" Steve asked as he darted his eyes between us. "What's going on?"

"Just our lab project." Billy said with a smirk. He had a dangerous glint in eye, one that said that we'd be doing more than studying – which was true, of course. We wouldn't be studying at all, instead we'd be testing to see if I had some freakish power, yet Steve didn't know this and was left to speculate just what this devilish glint meant he'd be doing with his little sister.

...

When I got home, I found the roses; dead and grey.

I dropped my school bag next to my door before shutting it. The roses lay in my trash can, their faded petals greyed and ashy. The one on my bedside table fared no better and the edge of one rotting petal resembled a frayed feather, fallen and forgotten from a bird high

above the storm clouds of Hawkins.

I didn't touch them, and instead marvelled at how quickly it had taken them to get to this state. *That was quick*, I thought, as I sat on my bed and stared at them. Perhaps when things came back, they only had a short amount of time left.

My hand drifted past the rose and landed on my telephone. I had to call Billy so that we could test this out together. I didn't want to be alone for this. Once he was here I would touch them again – that was when I would find out if I could really bring the dead back to life, although the more I thought on the topic, the more it seemed likely.

...

"Hello?" A deep voice answered.

It was his father.

I hated what he did to his own son. I hated him. I wanted to shout at him, tell him that I knew what he did to Billy. But I couldn't. It was too risky; who knows the amount of trouble Billy would be in if his father found out that Billy had told someone.

"Is anyone there?" He asked.

"Uh, yeah. It's Clare Harrington. Billy's—" I wondered how he'd react if I said 'girlfriend'. I supposed telling him that wouldn't do anything good for Billy, not when his father so clearly didn't like me. "-lab partner."

"The girl who was here last week?" He asked, voice smooth.

"Yeah." I said, awkward.

"I'll go get Billy." He said, before I hear silence on the other end.

A few moments passed. I heard nothing, and I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

Then I heard the scrape of skin against the plastic telephone as someone held it up to their ear.

"Clare?" Billy's asked.

"Billy." I smiled, finally able to hear his voice.

"What's wrong?" He asked, voice raspy and hushed. Perhaps there was someone listening to him.

"Do you think you can come over soon?" My brow creased as I swallowed down nerves.

"Is it the thing? The roses?" He asked, voice urgent.

"Yes." I said and dead silence followed.

...

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter it's the second longest one so far!

Sorry if there were any mistakes...

I realised that one of my OCs Hannah shares the same name as a character who committed suicide from '13 Reasons Why'. I've never seen the show actually, so it's quite a coincidence. When doing research for Crimson Wings, I did come across negative reviews of '13 Reasons Why' so when writing parts of this story I tried to do the opposite of what the show did - they were told not to be graphic with the depictions of suicide as it may affect people who are suicidal, yet the show still did it anyway. That's something that I tried to stay away from since my goal is to entertain ya guys not trigger anyone.

I am so truly thankful to those that have reviewed this story so far! The feedback has been amazing!

17. Where Anything Can Happen

Hi everyone! Thank you to everyone who followed, faved, or reviewed!

And thank you so much to for editing and to ilypopxtart333 for helping with an idea I was testing out in this chapter.

Hope you enjoy!

...

Chapter 17: Where Anything Can Happen

"Oh what a wonderful soul so bright inside you. Got power to heal the sun's broken heart, power to restore the moon's vision too." — Aberjhani, *Songs from the Black Skylark zPed Music Player*

Tuesday 4th December 1984

Billy

I revelled in the glare sent by King Steve who no doubt was reeling after finding me and Clare together in the parking lot. His threat to stay away from her, of course, had fallen on deaf ears. I acted as though I had ignored the glare sent by King Steve – another tactic meant to provoke him – and checked the time. My watch read 3:34.

"Max, we should get going. We don't wanna be late." I said, the last part of it causing a crease between her brows and a look which was almost vulnerable before it disappeared as swiftly as it had appeared.

"Late for what, Hargrove?" Steve asked, annoying as ever as his chin raised in question.

Neil was back at 4:00. Our journey would take twenty-three and a half minutes, which would leave me with two and a half minutes, barely enough time to get my room and avoid Neil until Susan called us for dinner at exactly 6:00. At home, everything had to run smoothly, every cog well-oiled so Neil could function efficiently.

But you can't tell King Steve about that, can you? The voice said as it slithered into my mind again.

"None of your business, Harrington." I said.

"Boys," Clare said as she broke Steve's and I's glaring contest. My eyes went to Clare before I looked away, annoyed at the shame I felt bubble up from my stomach like vomit.

"Steve, we should go too." She said.

"I'm gonna go too. See you tomorrow, Max." Said Sinclair as he smiled nervously and somewhat awkwardly, probably since he was unused to me in the audience when talking to my step-sister.

"Bye Lucas," Max said back, her cheeks pink. God, I hated that colour.

I felt my lips purse and with narrowed eyes, I glared at Sinclair's back as he trod through the parking lot and over to the bike rack. I still remembered the argument he and Max had just after Halloween. Max had been furiously walking toward my car in the school parking lot, Lucas hot on her heels before she'd turned around and shouted at him. Afterward, in the car, Max had lied about the whole thing. That was the time I'd grabbed onto her wrist and squeezed as I warned her about what I learned from Neil; to stay away from black people. I still have the scar Neil gave me after he found me with Dylan. I still have a lot of scars, some thin, others thick, some raised, mostly flat, some pink and others white, but each was a lesson.

"Billy," Clare said, fortunately tearing me away from memories I shouldn't give a shit about. "I'll call you later about the thing maybe."

"The thing?" I asked, mind still hazy.

The message was clear when she looked at me – more like glared – with her head tilted forward and her eyes narrowed to slits.

The roses, idiot!

"Oh!" I said before I gave her a nod. "That thing. Sure."

"What thing?" Steve asked with eyes wide as they darted between us.

"It's just our lab project," I said, smirking. His eyes narrowed as he gave me a look of suspicion like he didn't believe what I'd said, and he had good reason not to. I was lying. But Steve didn't know – couldn't know or even come close if he guessed – about just what Clare and I would be doing; testing if she could bring the dead back.

...

"It was obviously Clare who told you to apologise," Max said.

"So, what?" I asked, eyes focused on the road ahead which had dark grey wet patches and puddles in stray potholes from last night's rainfall. The weather today, however, had been cold – a dry kind of cold that seemed to seep into my bones, making me miss the heat of the orange Californian sun.

"Well, you're fine with her now." She said as she mulled over her thoughts in that fat head of hers. "But you weren't last week. You've obviously made up to her somehow and I just figured that maybe your apology to Lucas had something to do with it."

I glanced at her with my chin raised and the corners of my mouth also rising. Her eyes widened at my expression before she masked her shock by giving me a smug grin.

"Knew it." She said, cocky.

"You don't know most of it," I said, chest filled with smugness at the sight of her face falling. She wanted to know more, but I wasn't gonna tell.

I wouldn't tell her that Clare and I were dating now, nor would I tell her about anything else we'd done together. And I would never tell her about the roses. Or anything the roses meant; Clare had powers and supernatural shit existed and how the line between life and death had seemed to blur recently. Hell, it must be that way for most of Hawkins considering what had happened to Will Byers. And Max was friends with him.

Did she know? Surely if those boys knew, they would've told Max. And they probably knew a lot with Will as their friend. But how did

Clare know? Perhaps Will's brother had told her. That's probably how, I thought, yet I knew something was off. Not just with Clare and her story about Will but with this whole goddamn town. I knew there were missing pieces of information that Clare hadn't told me. I'd seen it on her face last night, but I had been too focused on my anger after finding out that the lab had lied about some kid drowning. I shouldn't have taken it so personally. It's not like I should care about Will Byers.

"Not fair. You can't not tell me after saying that!" Max said. "Please."

"How about you tell me something first," I said.

Max sat back against her chair and tensed at my lowered tone.

"Did you know about Will Byers?" I looked at her and found her staring out the windshield, eyes wide. "You know why they call him Zombie-boy, right?"

"Cause everyone said he..." Max trailed off.

"Drowned." I swallowed a lump. "It was the lab trying to cover their asses, y'know. Fucking crazy." I finished, hoping that this would butter her up so she'd start talking.

"I know, right?" Max said and smiled a little as if trying to lighten the mood. "That lab did some crazy shit."

"Yeah." I agreed. "I mean, what else did they do? You must know stuff."

Her head dipped away from me as she bit her bottom lip which only made it that much clearer that she knew something.

"I don't. How would I?" She looked down.

"Byers is your friend." My hands tightened on the wheel. "He'd tell you things."

She was silent for a moment.

"There was nothing to tell." She shrugged though her voice quivered,

a tell-tale sign of her deceit.

"Really?" I said and felt my foot grow heavier on the gas pedal.

"Just leave it." She said. "No one's told me anything."

"Well, you know what happens when you lie," I said with not even a second's hesitation.

"I'm not." She said, and her voice lightly shook with nerves.

"Are you sure about that?" I said before I glanced at her. I tried to soften my eyes, but the threat was still there, and it was meant to remind her of the last time she'd lied to me. I'd broken her skateboard and had even enjoyed the way it had splintered under my hands, but then I'd seen the tears fill her eyes and I had felt it; sickening guilt which made me feel like some kind of wimp. I didn't want to hurt her again – for my sake, not hers – but I would if I had to.

"I'm sure." She said after a moment of hesitation in a voice as strong as the courage in her eyes.

"Fine then." I scowled before I let myself drown in the feel of the engine's purr against my flesh.

...

We pulled up and parked along the sidewalk with grim expressions.

"He's... early?" Max asked though she knew the answer.

Neil's car sat where he always left it, perfectly parked in his space before the garage.

I stayed silent as I shut the engine shut off.

We climbed out of the car and walked to the front door. I searched for any movement through the orange glass in the door but there was nothing. The house was still and quiet, as was the neighborhood. It was so unlike my home, where people would be out enjoying the sun and kids loudly played on the streets until late. Yet in the end, it was still the same. There was still the same dead-silence filled with fear

you could almost taste wherever we moved. And that would never change as long as Neil lived.

I opened the door with Max closely behind me. We took the first few steps into the narrow hallway. I felt as though I was walking into a stranger's home. A crackling rectangle of silver and blue light glowed onto the wall from the archway which led into the living room. There was a newscaster droning on, their dull voice acting as background noise. I heard the door as it was closed delicately by Max's hands.

I took a breath in. I let it go. I stepped forward, facing the fact that each step brought me closer to Neil. Max was behind me the entire time, centring me and helping me along. I wondered if she knew she did that, and if she did know, then why would she want to help someone like me?

I straightened up as I reached the archway, meaning to walk straight past it. The plan was that Neil wouldn't see me and even if he did, he wouldn't care to call me in to talk with him.

"Hey, Billy. Maxine." His voice halts my plan just as it halts the blood in my veins. "Come in here."

Max and I exchanged a glance, her face opaque in the shadowy hallway but I could still make out her features. Her eyes were wide which made it evident to me that the only time Max will ever look like as much of a pussy as me is when Neil is around. This made my stomach turn before it settled into fresh anger which began to grow like a fire within my chest.

Fuck this, I thought before I strolled through the arch and into Neil's sight with my back straight and chin angled upward. Max followed behind.

"What do you think of this?" Neil asked as he gestured to the TV with his glass of water.

"About what, dad?" Max asked. As fucked as it sounded, I knew he liked it when she called him 'dad'.

"The news." He said.

We both looked at the crackling picture and listened to the story.

"...high-ranking members from the U.S Department of energy have admitted involvement in the death and cover-up of Hawkins resident..." The news lady read as they played images of black cars and army trucks driving through the steel gates of the lab.

"We just moved here." Neil scowled. "This neighborhood was supposed to be perfect."

"...the kind of town where, they say, nothing happens..." The reporter finished as if adding salt to Neil's wound.

"This place is such a..." Neil shook his head at a loss for the right word.

"Shithole?" I said, without thinking. He could take that as disrespectful after spending all his money on leaving Cali behind. He'd maybe think I was doubting him, calling him an idiot for choosing Hawkins. I expected a punishment of some kind.

But that didn't happen. He looked at me with his hard blue eyes. Dead eyes. A small huff left him and the corners of his mouth tilted up ever so minutely.

He had laughed.

I tried to stay still despite the shiver that ran along my spine. I wasn't sure of what had been scarier; the silence before the laugh or the laugh itself.

"Good one, son." He said before he lent back on the green couch and took a sip of his water.

"Thanks, dad." I said after a moment, neglecting to call him 'Sir' just as Max had.

"Now, why don't you go cut your hair?" He said. "You look like a girl."

There it was: the punishment for my remark. It hadn't been a telling off nor a slap or a kick; it had been humiliation. Short and brief yet it

had filled my stomach with ice.

If anyone else had dared say that to me, they'd be on the floor right now with me on top beating the shit out of them. But it had been my dad who had said it. I wasn't sure if I'd ever hit him back one day. Maybe I would. But afterward, once the blood had dried on my knuckles and cooled in my veins, what would I do?

Why are you always such a pussy? The voice asked.

The phone on the side table rang and it broke the air between me and Neil and it also severed my thoughts from the voice's as a knife would sever flesh.

Neil picked up the phone. He steadily brought it to his ear and spoke in his calm voice – the one he used when talking to strangers. He'd probably used this version of himself to lure Susan in.

"Hello?" He answered as his expression became a degree warmer – part of the performance.

There seemed to be no one on the other end, just static. His brow creased.

"Is anyone there?" He asked.

Someone spoke.

His face flattened out, and the coldness which lived in his eyes spread to the rest of his features.

"The girl who was here the other week?" He asked and his eyes landed on mine. "I'll go get Billy." He said before pressing the phone to his chest.

"Maxine. Leave." He said, voice low.

She did as she was told and left the room but not before she sent cast a sympathetic look my way. My stomach turned.

"I don't like this girl." He said. "What is she to you?"

I didn't answer.

"Is she your girlfriend?" He asked. "Even if I don't like her, I expect you to treat her with nothing but respect."

"Yes, sir. I will." I said.

Neil shook his head at me.

"At least it's a girl this time." He said.

My jaw tightened.

...

After the phone call had ended, I headed for the archway. Clare was going to touch the roses and we were going to watch as they came back to life. This town 'where nothing ever happens' was the complete opposite.

"Where you off to, boy?" Neil said, leaning his elbows on his knees.

"Just Clare's house," I said, voice small.

"Phone call sounded pretty tense." He said.

It's not like he cares, the voice said.

I didn't respond and instead watched his face for any of the cues that meant it was time to run.

"What's this about dead roses?" He said, cold eyes not leaving mine.

"It's our lab project," I said.

"You know what happens when you lie to me." He said.

"I'm not lying," I said and hated the way my voice quivered.

...

I had parked a few blocks down from her house and walked the rest of way, each step quicker than the last. My whole body was jittery

and filled with electricity. Clare had been waiting for me by her front door and she'd pulled me into the house, snuck me past Steve's bedroom and into her own room. The pink which was everywhere had greeted me like an ex-girlfriend; a slap to my senses.

Now, we sat on her bed with a single grey rose between us.

Her hand hovered over it, not daring to let gravity pull it down.

With a shaky breath, I raised my own hand and placed it above hers, fingertips flirting with the tops of her fingers as I gently pushed her hand down. We looked each other in the eye as her skin touched it.

We moved our still joint hands so that they lay beside the rose. Her fingers locked around my hand. We waited. The wind blew into the room through the window which seemed to never close. Birds squawked from outside. And then it was silent.

The skeletal stem and limp petals became plump and supple as silk.

My eyes widened.

Crimson filled the petals like blood.

...

"Are you still going to do it?" I asked.

I leaned back against the front door with her next to me, blankly staring out of the glass screen.

"Bring Hannah back?" She said.

I let silence answer for me. Her lower lip trembled so I brushed my thumb across it. Her hand came to rest on my wrist, thumb circling my wrist bone.

"I... I want to." She murmured. "Jesus! I don't kn..." She paused. "I don't know anymore. It's just so- so complicated. I don't want this. I don't want to be like this!"

I pressed my hand to the side her face and stepped closer, pulling her

into me. I pressed a kiss against her forehead and hoped the kiss had soothed her as much as it had done for me.

My necklace lay heavy and I gently smoothed my thumb over the pendant of Saint Philomena as I thought of what I wanted to say. *If I could bring people back, then my mom and my sister's graves would be the first place I'd go. But I wouldn't be able to do it. Mom had always said that death was concrete. Final. And there shouldn't be anything other than God himself that can reverse it.*

"What's the point in anything?" Clare said. "There's just nothing but pain. Other people's pain and my own. It's too much and I can't help them. But I-I want to."

"But you can't," I said.

"Yeah, cause it's like you said. Some lab will take me and experiment on me. It wouldn't be the first time in Hawkins." She said, lip curled as she returned her stare to the glass.

I wondered about what else had been on the news today and what other secrets reporters had dug up about the lab.

Her eyes went wide and her jaw slacked. There was a black Ford rolling up the driveway. It stopped. The doors opened and revealed a dark-haired man and a blonde woman.

"Get away from the window." She said.

I backed away.

"Your parents?" I asked.

She squeaked a 'yeah' as her head nodded. She looked like Bambi caught in headlights.

"Upstairs! Go!" She said.

Just as we reached the first step, we heard Steve in the upstairs hallway.

Clare yanked my hand. Her eyes darted between the door and the

stairs. Steve's footsteps came closer to the end of the hallway. The doorknob turned.

Clare's eyes landed on something behind me and she jumped for it. There was a closet under the stairs. It was small but big enough for me to hide there. She pushed me into the darkness before I could argue and slammed the door shut.

I heard Steve's muffled voice and then Clare's. By this time her parents had entered the house and had started to talk. Their dad's voice – what I could make out of it – was bored and stern, yet their moms were lighter and she sounded as though she were tweeting like a dove as she doted on her children.

Meanwhile, I was stuck in a damn closet surrounded by thick winter coats and boots.

This is so fucked, the voice said.

A rattle noise was made. The doorknob started to turn.

Clare spoke, and it stilled the handle.

Her voice was muffled yet still understandable as she told her parents that she'd take their coats. Luckily, the way the door opened acted as a wall keeping me hidden from her parents.

I wasn't quite sure why she wanted to hide me. I thought perhaps she did it because her parents were big shots with tons of cash who wouldn't want to see their only daughter with trash. And she hid me to keep another fight from brewing between me and Steve which was likely to happen if he found me in their house, but I had to admit that another fight with him wouldn't be entirely unwelcome. Although it meant the cuts on my knuckles would reopen, the pain was worth it if I could control something. And a fight was definitely something I could take control of, or at least I could after getting a few punches or kicks from the other guy first.

The door opened to reveal Clare, arms full with two trench coats as her eyes caught mine. Her eyebrows came together as she stepped forward and hung the coats up, giving me a small smile laced with

apology. And then she was gone. The door was closed and before long I began to hear suitcases accompanied by footsteps as they were dragged and scraped up the stairs. Clare's mom and dad hadn't said much, I only heard her mom telling her to be careful with her stuff. I wasn't sure if Clare was helping or if she'd gone off somewhere else, although I couldn't imagine her going too far from this damn closet.

Then it went quiet. It was just me and the coats now, no voices outside, only footsteps that seemed to head away from my position. My eyes followed the narrow line of light which came from the crack between the door and its frame, cutting through the blackness. It was under this line of light I discovered Clare's coat.

I knew it was fucking weird to sniff another person's stuff, but I did it anyway. My nose brushed the fur-lined hood and breathed in. It smelled like sweetness. Like fresh strawberries and apples in Springtime. Intoxicated, my form leaned further onto the coat which caused something to crackle. I was already creepily sniffing at her coat, so what difference would it make to check her pockets for what made the crackling sound. I slid my hand in the first one. There was nothing, so I moved to the next. My fingers traveled inside and found paper, yet it wasn't smooth or thick like the quality paper Clare used, it was coarser and much thinner, though not as thin as a page from the Bible. The other side of the page was glossy.

I pulled it out and held it in the line of light. I discovered I was holding two pieces of paper, one which looked like an article and the other was a photograph with frayed edges and a wobbly line going through it as if it had been folded in half.

I held the picture in the light and the first face I saw was a woman's. Her face was pale and marred with dark rings under her eyes as she lay back in what looked like a hospital bed. There was something familiar in the set of her features; the way her nose met her forehead and the way her bottom lip was plumper than the top. The next face belonged to a baby, a chubby thing, asleep at its mother's breast. I wondered who they could be. Clare and her mother maybe? I hadn't seen much of the woman who had pulled up to the house a few minutes ago, but she was definitely blonde. The woman in the photograph had orange hair, blazing like Max's. Maybe she dyed her hair. But if it wasn't Clare and her mom, then why did she have this

picture? It made sense that it was them.

I turned my attention to the article. It was definitely not something from a recent newspaper; the page was scuffed on the edges and yellowed with time. But the writing was still mostly clear. I began to read.

It talked about the lab. My eyes widened. How long had shit with the lab been happening? How long had Clare known? What else did she know?

My breath caught when the closet filled with light. Clare stood in the doorway, forehead creased as she saw what I held.

"Fuck." She whispered. "That's..."

"It's what?" I said back, voice hushed. "About the lab?"

"I-"

"It talks about 'MKUltra' and other fucked up shit, you know, like how some lady said they kidnapped her kid, which was probably true. Right? If they can almost successfully make it look like Byers died, then they can definitely kidnap someone."

"We can't talk about this here." She said as she bit her lip.

"How do you have it anyway?" I asked.

"I found it." She said.

"Where?"

"The library." Her voice wavered.

"Why are you lying?" I raised my hands in question.

"I'm not lying." She shook her head.

"Clare, if you know things then why not tell me?" I asked.

"It's not that simple!"

"Yeah, it is." I nodded. "You just open your trap and start talking."

"I can't just tell you about..." She stopped talking.

"About what?"

"About everything." She said. "There are horrible things in this town. And really terrible things have happened to people I care about."

"Aww, let me get my violin." My eyes narrowed.

"Shut up!" Her eyes began to water. "You don't understand."

"Then tell me what happened so I can."

There's a creak from upstairs. Clare's eyes darted to the noise. Her lip trembled. We waited, hackles up like an animal ready to bolt at any sign of movement as we listened for something else to move or make a noise. Clare's shoulders were raised, tense as if being hunted by a monster. But after an eternity of waiting, it seemed as though all had stilled. Nothing was gonna happen.

"We shouldn't talk now." She shook her head. "Not here. Not yet."

I frowned but nodded my agreement nonetheless.

"It should be safe to go out the back way." She whispered. "Come on."

...

Hope you all enjoyed! I'd love to hear from you guys about what you thought or if you have any questions.

Until next time!

18. Stranger Truths

Sorry it's a bit shorter than normal :/

And thank you to the editor

Enjoy!

Chapter 18: Stranger Truths

'...alone in suicide, which is deeper than death, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together.' – *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides

Tuesday 4th December 1984

Clare

What had happened after I found him in the closet with the picture and the clipping in his hand? We had argued, of course. And then we had stealthily sneaked through my house to the back door. I shut the door behind us and he had stood with his back pressed against the bricking of my house. I stood before him and scowled.

He was still holding the picture and the clipping. I held my palm out. When he didn't give them back, I tried to snatch it from him. He jerked his hand away, lifting it high.

"Give it back!" I said.

"Tell me the truth."

I glanced up to Steve's window and thanked God that it was closed and my brother couldn't hear us. Billy needed to leave. The cuts on Billy's knuckles would surely reopen if Steve found him here and with me.

"Fine!" I whispered. "Keep them. Now go."

He pursed his lips. He wasn't leaving that easily.

Finding Billy in the closet with those items in his grip had made time freeze. I wasn't prepared for him to know about those things. I wasn't even prepared to know the full truth, as was made evident by the bitter dread stirred up every time I saw the clipping or the picture or the pandora's box they had come from (which sat stolidly on my desk). And I didn't even fully know the story of Clara Hertz, nor did anyone. Yet. Jonathan's friend was supposedly working on it.

But all of that was my mystery. I couldn't understand why Billy would want to know about these things, but then again, I was curious about his past and his secrets, so it made sense that he would be interested in mine.

"Why do you even care?" I asked, trying to dissuade him.

"I just... I want to know what's going on. I asked Max earlier and she didn't say jack shit." He said. "I know she lied. And I know you're lying and I just don't know why you'd lie to me."

"I-"

"Look, I know the lab has done some really bad shit but I can handle it." He said.

"I can barely handle it!" I said. "Did you ever question why I sleep with a fucking light on?"

"Clare-"

"Just trust me. You're better off not knowing about any of this. About the lab and that- that thing..." I said, trying to keep my voice even.

The wind picked up around the garden, tossing leaves from out of the empty pool and kicking dust into the air. Billy licked his lips and his eyes flickered over to the leaves before they darted back to mine.

"What thing?" He asked.

"Forget it." I said and avoided his eyes.

"You're just gonna leave me in the dark then?" He asked.

"I have to."

"Why?" He asked.

"To protect you."

"I don't need to be protected by some princess." He scoffed.

"Yes, you do-

"No, I don't." He stepped away from the brick wall, putting his face inches from mine. "I just want to know. I think I fucking deserve it. I've seen a girl resurrect a dog and a dead flower bloom like it was fucking springtime! It's crazy! And I don't know why you sleep with the light on or how you can bring dead stuff back, but I do know that since moving here, you've been the one thing that's kept me from..." He stopped himself talking as if he were about to admit to the crime but wizened up before the words left him. He swallowed before continuing. "...look, I hate this shitty little town but I might start to not hate it as much 'cause you're in it... and I want to know the truth about whatever's going on because it's hurting you. And I don't want you to hurt anymore. So, please..." His plea was soft, a delicate whisper I barely heard. I'd never heard him speak so softly. "Tell me."

I inhaled. I could taste his scent in the air.

"Trust me." His blue eyes bore into mine, a sea delicately swirling with curiosity. He breathed out and arabesque swirls poured from his mouth as his breath met the cold air.

Telling him wouldn't solve my problems nor would it solve his own. But he wanted to know. I guessed that in a way telling him about the upside down and MKUltra and my dreams would bring him closer to me. And that's all I wanted; someone close. Someone who cared for me just as I cared for them.

"Okay," I said. "I'll tell you."

His face brightened somewhat.

"But not now," I said, hindering the smile from forming on his face.

"When?" He asked.

"Tonight."

He'd left after saying he'd pick me up at 7. I had followed him as if not seeing him leave with my own eyes would somehow make me feel as if he were still here. I watched him as he walked past my parent's car and down the road and I thought of how complicated things had gotten. Billy getting involved with all this lab stuff would lead nowhere good.

...

The black fingers of trees cut into the sky. I watched as a crow perched on the branches across the house and behind the pool. I sat on the window seat, feet bare and window open wide. The crow squawked and turned its head my way. I wondered if it watched me just as I watched him. He squawked again, a terrible sound almost like a girl's scream before it flew away. I remembered Hannah voicing her wish to be a bird. I thought she was silly but now I knew better. How simple would be it be to fly away from my problems? How wonderful it must be to be that crow. A thought flew across my mind; did crows ever dream of being human?

That was stupid. Why would they ever want to become like us? Our lives were too harsh, too violent.

Hannah had been thirteen when she'd done it. A broken heart and shattered future had led to her taking her own life. I could bring her back but what would be here for her? Her parents had left town, her house sold, her dog had been put down by her parents – the presence of it too strong a reminder of their dead daughter. And Dave – the guy who'd left her in trouble – had left town before she turned her bathwater pink. I often used to wonder if she thought killing herself would make him come back to her. But I could never be sure about that now.

Her life had been short and melancholic and full of love for hopeless love. In death, maybe she was happy. She was religious – her mother, a Catholic, and her father went along with whatever her mother said – and she had kept a laminated picture of the Virgin Mary as a

bookmark. Of course, she'd used it to hold the pages of erotica novels she'd smuggled from bookstores, but she still believed in an afterlife. If I brought her back, would I be pulling her from Heaven? There was no possibility in my mind that she could ever go to Hell, therefore the only place she could be in – if an afterlife existed – could be Heaven. I could never drag her from warmth and happiness and back into the cold and harsh existence on earth.

And if I did bring her back, how alone might she be to be the only dead girl walking? Hopefully, Hannah's not alone in Heaven. But she was alone in suicide, which is deeper than death, and where I will never find the pieces to put her back together.

A gust of dusty wind made the white curtains flutter around me like ghosts. I shivered before I pulled my knees to my chest and looked to my bed. The sheets were rumpled from where Billy and I had sat. The rose lay there and taunted me. There was no denying my powers now. The only person I knew who had powers was the creepy girl and she'd gotten them from the MKUltra experiment. There was no way I was connected to that... but I must be and so was Clara Hertz. And that baby she held had powers. My stomach turned. The answer was staring me right in the face but I didn't want to think about how MKUltra, Clara Hertz and I were all connected. It was so obvious. If I thought of it – *the truth* – then there would be no going back.

"Dinner, Clare." A woman shouted from downstairs.

It took me a few seconds to realize it had been my mom who had called to me.

...

Steve made dinner and my mom, father, Steve and I all sat at the dining table which was large enough for ten and so it dwarfed our four. Normally the table only held Steve and I. Our number had doubled yet it felt emptier than it had before. We small talked and I tried not to think of the red rose which lay beautiful and undead on my rumpled bedsheets.

Dinner finished and we parted, going off to our own spaces. It wasn't long until Billy was going to pick me up. I snuck downstairs and out

of the house. If anyone noticed I was gone – and it would no doubt only be Steve who noticed – then I would tell them I was studying at the library. I was getting better at lying.

...

The sky was pink and clumps of snow swayed gently in the breeze as it fell around us from our place on the hood of his car. Across from us sat the abandoned park with its musty sprawling climbing frames, now rotten and long forgotten by the children who used to play here. Beyond the park, the trees stood still and let the snow whiten the fingertips of their branches. The ground was still wet in places from the harsh rainfall Hawkins had seen last night making it impossible for the snow to set.

I held up my hand and a snowflake fell flat and delicate onto my palm. The edges of it began to shrink and I watched as it melted into a raindrop.

"It's finally snowing," I said.

"I didn't come here to talk about the weather," Billy said, cigarette in hand as he reminded me of something I had not forgotten.

"You shouldn't smoke that," I said with my upper lip curled.

He brought it up to his mouth and took a deep breath from it. There was a spitefulness in his eyes and a mischief which dared me to stop him. I wasn't going to take the bait.

"You're so annoying." I said as I shook my head. "Fine then. Smoke for all I care." I fanned the strings of smoke away from me.

"Can you start already?" He said as he moved the cigarette lower down by his waist and away from me. "Spill."

I inhaled and after a moment of trying to organize my thoughts, I exhaled.

"Earlier... when I said I found the picture and the clipping in the library," I said. "I lied."

Billy had listened as I explained to him the dreams which led me to the box, the dreams which were still happening. This, of course, had stirred up more questions from him. It felt like a betrayal of the gang's trust to tell him the truth about MKUltra and Eleven's powers but I did it anyway. And I answered the questions which came after that. I told him about Eleven accidentally opening a gate.

"A gate to what?" He asked.

I bit my lip. "The kids call it the upside down."

...

Purple twilight had fallen upon us and had begun to morph into an inky blue, a sign of the darkness which would inevitably and swiftly descend. Snow still fell around us in smooth waves. It had stuck after all and thinly whitened parts of the grass, though the field was mostly still green and muddied.

I'd told him everything now. There were no more secrets (well, I hadn't told him about the weird menstruation problems I was having after the nightmares for obvious reasons but apart from that he knew everything I did).

He flicked his cigarette away onto a patch of snow-covered grass and steam rose from where the fiery end had hissed away the snow. His hand reached into his jacket pocket and he fumbled for a few seconds before pulling his hand back out with the clipping and the picture.

I frowned.

"Sorry I didn't give them back. It was..." He trailed off, looking away as he held out the picture and the clipping.

"Childish?" I said for him.

His forehead creased before it flattened out once more and his eyes focused on where his dead cigarette lay. The steam had stopped rising.

"Thanks," I said and took them from him. My eyes traveled over Clara Hertz and her tired face. I curled my lip at her before I gruffly stuffed

them into my jacket pocket. Billy watched me and his face morphed into a frown which mirrored my own.

"You good?" He asked as his brows turned upward.

"To be honest I don't really want to see the picture anymore." I shrugged. "I don't want anything to do with it... or with this town."

"That makes two of us." He breathed out.

I turned my head to him. He ignored the way the breeze tugged his hair into his eyes. I scooted across the bonnet and closer to him, needing his warmth.

"Why don't we go somewhere?" I said as I brushed the back of my hand over his.

He lifted his head. "Like where? The quarry?"

"No, no." I let a small laugh escape. "I meant where you're from."

"California?" He said, brow wrinkled.

I nodded, sheepish. A pessimistic part of me thought he'd say no, but a smile spread across his features and warmed me like the sun. He grabbed onto my hand and intertwined our fingers before he brought them up to his face. He pressed his lips to the back of my hand. Butterflies danced in my stomach. A snowflake landed on his cheek. I brushed it away and leaned forward to place my lips to his.

One day we'd go to California and dance across the sandy beaches in the glow of golden sunlight. We'd escape Hawkins.

...

Once I was home again, it wasn't long before mom came to my bedroom. I'd been at the window seat doing science homework – something which I was never very good at and Billy surprisingly was – when she had wandered into my room through the door I'd left open. It felt safer to leave the door open, that way Steve could hear me if anything bad happened. But this also meant that mom must've thought the open door was an open invitation, of which it was not.

"Oh, how pretty." Mom said as she wandered into the room. She stood before my bed and with polished bony fingers she brought the rose to her nose and she breathed in its undead scent. I wondered if the rose smelt rotten like the climbing frames from the park or if I'd managed to bring back the fresh scent it held before it had decayed.

"How are you?" Mom asked as she dragged her finger along a smooth part of the stem, a part which lacked thorns.

"Good." I nodded from my place on the window seat.

She walked over to me and closed the window before she sat next to me and mirrored my position with her legs crossed beneath her as she grasped at my fist with her free hand. Her warm thumb smoothed over the back of my hand and I tried not to cringe.

"I meant about... I noticed how distracted you were at dinner. There was something on your mind. I could tell. Is it bad tonight?" She said.

"No... No, I'm not picturing her anymore. I've had some weird dreams lately but I can deal with it. I know how to shut out the bad thoughts now."

"Good... that's really good, honey. Steve's been telling me that you have a few friends now. Taylor and... and you're friends with Jonathan again." She tightened her grip on my hand as I nodded. "That's great! I always liked Joyce. She did a good job with her kids..." She paused and her eyes glistened. "Listen, honey. I know I'm not around as much as I should be and neither is your father so if you can't tell us about it, then tell one of your friends. Okay? Can you do that for me, Clary?"

"Yeah. Course." I said. "There's someone Steve didn't tell you about and I've told him some things already..." I trailed off.

"Him?" She said, thin eyebrows raised.

"Oh, uh. Billy." I said.

"Billy, huh?" She smiled coyly.

"Mom, shush," I said as my eyes darted to the open door. "Steve hates

him."

"Well, does he have a last name?" She asked, not even questioning why Steve hated Billy.

"Hargrove," I said. "They're new to town."

"And this is from him?" She waved the rose. She didn't give me time to answer. "Hmm. Well, he better treat you right. You are dating, yes?"

I gave a tight-lipped smile and Mom's mouth widened before she tapped my leg. "My girl's growing up and I didn't even know about it."

The sadness from before came back and replaced mom's joy with pain.

"Mom. Don't worry."

"I just wish me and your father had more time with you. But we will now. And that's a promise." She said as she brought her face closer to mine. "I'm going to tell you something now about your father. Don't tell anyone I said this, and especially not Steve. I want to tell him myself."

I nodded.

"Your father lost his job."

My eyebrows raised. "He got fired?"

"No, no." She waved her hand as she leaned back. "Nothing like that."

"Oh... that sucks." I said, not quite knowing what to say to appease her. I know it was horrible to think but I didn't really care if he lost his job.

"I think you'll find it doesn't. He'll get another job, hopefully in Hawkins. And when he does we can be a family. All together and under one roof." She said and I watched as her smile grew. "And I'm happy that we're back before Christmas."

"I guess it's not as sucky as it seemed then," I said as I smiled at her.

"Nope." She said, popping the 'p' and shaking her head. Her frosty blonde curls bounced with the movement of her head.

A warmth spread in my chest as if it were clogged by thick honey.

It was easy to think bad things about someone when they weren't around, only for them to disprove your thoughts when you next spoke to them. I had thought mom didn't care for me or at least didn't care for me enough, and perhaps she didn't but what she'd made me realize was that she wanted to care. She wanted to be better and to be there for me and Steve. She knew she hadn't been there for us and had probably felt that weight on her shoulders for years, and it probably got worse every time she saw us; her mistakes made flesh.

Tommy had been right about one thing in the cafeteria; Steve and I did run from our problems. I guessed that's something we learned from our mom.

Her eyes landed behind me.

The light behind her eyes faded and her smile fell.

I followed her eyes and found it.

The box.

I turned back to her. Her jaw slacked. Her eyes were as round as wet marbles.

"Why do you have that?" Her grasp on my hand tightened almost painfully so. Her pointed fake nails were claws which threatened to stab into my skin.

I didn't answer her.

"You've seen her then." She said, her voice distant and haunted.

"Clara Hertz? I have."

"You weren't supposed to find out." She shook her head, eyes

haunted. "Not yet."

Her words hung in the air for a few dead moments.

"When was I supposed to find out?" I asked.

She stood abruptly and discarded the rose. It hit the box before it bounced off and landed limply on the wooden desk. A petal came loose and sat stranded next to the box.

"Mom!" I said.

She paused. Her rigid back faced me.

"Mom?"

She didn't say anything. She didn't even move. My eyes stung and fogged up.

"You are my mom, right? Or is my mom just some stranger?"

She walked to the door and leaned onto the handle.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was breathless.

She made to walk through the open doorway.

"Don't!" I stood. "Don't run from this."

I took cautious steps toward her.

"Tell me." I used Billy's earlier words. "I deserve to know. Are you my mother?"

Her head fell. For a second I thought she'd stay but then she walked out the door and down the hallway. I heard her bedroom door shut. I closed my own door before anyone could hear the sobs clogging my throat.

I supposed this strange truth didn't change much; Clara Hertz had never been there, and my mom... I mean Sarah Harrington hadn't either. They were both ghosts, both strangers.

...

I suppose it wasn't a shock to anyone about Clare's mom *not* being her mom...

And I stole the line about Hannah being 'alone in suicide' from The Virgin Suicides but The Dark Knight Rises stole lines from Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities so I guess it's okay to steal the line...? Maybe?

I'd love to hear any theories of what you think could happen next. I've *finally* planned the whole story out so if any of you are right then it'll help me to figure out how predictable this story is (if that makes sense). I feel like it's been very predictable so far so I need to fix that.

Thank you so much for reading! Please drop a review! I really wanna reach 150million reviews so pls hlp mee

19. Lover

Hey! Long time, no read...

I've got a new story going! It's a Steve/OC set in the same universe as this one but it starts before season 1. Please check it out if you're interested in Steve.

Thank you so much for the favs, follows and reviews!

Hope you enjoy this one

Chapter 19: Lover

'So, this is love. So, this is what makes life divine.' – Cinderella, *So This is Love*

Tuesday 4th December 1984

After a few minutes of drying my tears, I stood and made my way down the hallway. I came before the door to my father's study and paused before I pressed my ear against the door. It was silent. I stood back and placed my hand on the door knob. I opened it cautiously until I heard the click.

His study was a reddish brown almost like dried blood. It filled with a rectangle of yellow as the door swayed open and in the end of the yellow beam sat Mr Harrington at his desk. He looked up from the document he was reading, and his brown eyes landed on mine. The flickering fireplace was reflected in his eyes.

"Hey, dad." I said.

"Hello." He said. "Anything wrong? Have a seat."

His chair was shaped like a coffin. The leather one in front of his desk with burgundy cushions was smaller and of lesser importance. I didn't sit it in it. I looked at his desk and saw two pens laid beside two inkwells, one red and one black. The end of the metal pens pointed at me, or perhaps they pointed at the doorway in which I stood. They wanted me to leave. But I wasn't gonna.

I stepped in and closed the door behind me. I watched as the yellow light receded from the room and dimness set in. This place had always scarred me as a child and it wasn't hard to guess why.

All around on the walls sat books on science and law and the occasional bookend statuettes of little men whose fragile arms pushed against the books. They were frozen in that stance, forever doomed to keep the weight of the books from crushing them.

I stalked to the side to where one of his book cases stood.

"What is it?" He asked.

"Why are you back so early?" I asked as I traced my finger along the face of a bookend. "I heard you lost your job."

"I wonder who told you. It couldn't have been your mother." He said before a huff escaped him. He finished reading and picked up one of the pens before he dipped it in the red inkwell and began to make sharp notes over the black text.

"Mother'." I repeated, testing out the way it tasted on my tongue. It was funny how it tasted just as bitter as before.

He carried on writing and ignored my sour tone.

"That's funny." I walked over to the burgundy chair and stood behind it.

He looked up at me with a wrinkled forehead. We eyed one another as we waited for someone to speak. He blinked and parted his lips.

"Funny?" He asked.

"Yeah. 'Cause she's not." I said.

"Not what?"

"My mother."

His eyes sparked and for the first time in all my life I saw fear in them.

"That's ridicu-"

"Clara Hertz." I interrupted.

He didn't speak. The hand which still held the pen trembled.

"And... and your mother- er, my wife told you this?"

"No."

"The box." He said. "When the pipes burst..."

I nodded once, slow and sure.

"I assume you've heard what's been happening on the news." He said.

I nodded.

"Then you know I can't say anything." He said.

My brow wrinkled.

"What? How does that make sense? I *deserve* to know." I said, copying Billy's earlier plea. I leant my hands on the back of the chair. The air from the cushions breathed out as if sighing in frustration.

He opened a drawer from the hidden side of his desk and pulled a blank sheet of paper from it. He placed the document he'd been writing on to the side and placed the blank sheet in front of him. He began to write.

"Are you just going to ignore me?" I asked.

"No. Sit down."

"No." I said.

He glared at me. It was the look he'd give me when I misbehaved as a child but I stood my ground. In the back of my mind I could hear Billy cheering me on – I was not a pushover, not anymore.

"Fine then. Stand." He said before pushing the paper over to me.

A message was there. His red ink said:

It's too risky.

"What do you mean?" I looked at him, unsure.

He pressed a finger before his lips as he shook his head. He gestured to the other pen. I picked it up and dipped it in the black ink.

What is risky? I wrote.

I passed it to him.

I can't say anything to you. I have no way of knowing if the house has been bugged.

"Oh..." I said before I wrote: *Bugged by who?*

The lab. He wrote.

You're connected to them?

He read it, wrote on it and gave it back. His neat red letters read:

Clara was my sister and I worked at the lab.

...

Wednesday 5th December 1984

The first person I told was Joyce.

The snow had melted and left behind a concrete world. Everything was a wet grey: the gravel underfoot and the road into town, the sky, and even the bark on trees. Nothing could escape it.

When Steve had left for school and the house was quiet, I had snuck downstairs and escaped my house. I sought out the warmth from Joyce's house and her arms. Joyce was someone I could tell anything. And I needed to tell someone about what I'd discovered.

I wanted to tell Billy too: telling him about this new development had been on my mind into the early morning hours until I had finally

fallen asleep when birds began to tweet outside my open window. But would dumping another secret on him be too much? He hadn't seemed phased when I told him about everything else – well, not as phased as one should be when finding out that things that go bump in the night are real – but I supposed that Billy was good at shielding his feelings (at least the feelings which were not wrapped in anger) from everyone. I suspected he'd done that for most of his life.

"Honey, what's wrong? Shouldn't you be in school?" Joyce said when she opened the door to my sallow face.

"It's my mom. Well, she's not..."

"What wrong?" Joyce said as she wrapped her arms around me. "

"She's not my mom." I burrowed my head in the juncture of her neck and shoulder.

"Honey, I don't understand."

And so I told her. I told her of Clara Hertz and how she was connected to Terry Ives and MKUltra.

"Do you have..."

"A power?" I asked. "Uh," I didn't want to explain everything that had happened in the last few weeks and days concerning my 'power', so I lied. "I'm not sure."

"Honey..." She purred.

"But I don't care about all that. I don't have a mother now." I sniffed. "I never had one. She died. And so did my real father. I'm an orphan and I'll never have real parents."

"What about me?" Joyce said, her voice a firm and solid contrast to the tears in her eyes. "I always treated you like the girl I never had. And you were. You were my little girl."

I wrapped my arms around her waist and let out the last few sobs.

"How about it?" She asked as she smoother hair out of my eyes. "Can

I be your mom?"

I smiled and nodded as my tears tickled down my neck.

"Hey, I've..." Joyce sniffed. "I've got some ice cream in the fridge if you want some."

I let out a small laugh and nodded. Ice cream was just what I needed.

...

It was only a half hour later when I decided I should head to school, but first I needed some books from home so Joyce drove me over.

"Wait, that's the Hargrove boy's car, right?" Joyce asked as we pulled up to my house in her dinky car.

I looked up, startled. Sure enough, there was Billy's blue Camaro sat next to my parents' black BMW. It was empty though and Billy was nowhere to be seen.

"It is." I said.

"What's he doing here- wait, I thought you weren't with him anymore."

"Um... when I talked to you about him last time, we weren't technically together." I sank into the seat.

"But you are now?" Her brows rose.

"...yes." I felt my body sink even lower into the seat and the leather creaked awkwardly under me.

"I thought we agreed that you'd stay away from him." She said as she shut the engine off.

The car stilled and her question was left in the space between us.

I exhaled. "I- I couldn't. I didn't want to."

"So, it's not that *couldn't*, it's that you *wouldn't*." She narrowed her eyes although a knowing smile formed.

"It was just too hard." I admitted. "I care about him. A lot. And it turned out that he cares about me too. It just took him some time to let me know."

Joyce's steeled gaze softened. I wondered if she was remembering a time before Will and Jonathan; a time where she must have loved Lonnie or maybe another boy from her teenage years. Or perhaps she thought of Bob. There was a melancholic sorrow in her eyes, but there was also a concrete layer, a shield which tried to hide her vulnerability. This look had been acquired through a life of lost hope and death and loss of love. I wondered if one day, after living through the things Joyce had been through, I'd share her mastery of this look.

Perhaps I already did.

...

We walked into my house and all I could smell was starch and potpourri. From the archway which led into the living room I saw him on my couch, sat with his hands on his knees. He was talking to someone. Dad? Or Mom? (I didn't know if I could still call them that.)

"Billy." I smiled though I was still a little confused.

His head turned and his eyes found mine. He smiled though it was guarded.

"Hey, we saw your car outside." I said as I walked closer to the doorway and more of the room became visible which enabled my eyes to see who sat on the other end of the couch: Sarah Harrington or mom or aunt. Aunt Sarah? I wasn't sure what she'd prefer, nor was I sure of what *I* preferred.

"We?" She asked, her voice like ice.

Mom's – Sarah's – eyes filled with poison as she found stood Joyce next to me. Was she jealous that I had a better relationship with Joyce? Yesterday she'd only had good things to say about her but now, seeing her with me seemed to have lit a jealous fire in her.

"Where's... dad?" I asked.

"Out." She said, curt as her eyes found mine.

"Where?" I asked.

"Truancy?" Sarah ignored me. "Really, Clare?"

"I felt ill." I said. It wasn't a lie. I had felt sick after yesterday's revelation. "Went for a walk to clear my head."

"And came back with Mrs Byers." She said as her arms folded.

Joyce tilted her head to the side and Billy raised an eyebrow as he gave her a sideways glance at the bite in her voice.

"She drove passed me and asked if I wanted a lift home. I said yes." I said, voice as cold as hers.

"I hope it was no trouble for you, Mrs Byers." She said.

"It wasn't." Joyce shook her head, although I could tell she wasn't happy with having to involve herself in my white lie.

"Um, Billy..." I started, suddenly nervous in front of the two adults.
"Why're you here?"

"I..." His eyes left mine and darted to Joyce and then Sarah before finally coming back to mine. "I was worried."

I wondered how hard it must've been for him to sit there with the eyes of strangers on him and say that to me. He willingly showed vulnerability for me.

I looked between him and Sarah who sat in her fine silk dress and white pearls and her diamond engagement ring sitting alongside the golden wedding band, and Billy in a creased grey shirt, his leather jacket – one of the few clothes he had that were suited for winter – and his every day jeans with scratched boots and scruffy hair, and I noticed how different mine and Billy's worlds were. But they were similar too. We kept the company of liars and abusers. My parents – if I could even call them that – had lied to me and neglected Steve and I. Billy's mother had killed herself and left him alone with an abusive father. No wonder we were both so fucked in the head.

"We should get going then." I said. "To school I mean."

"I thought you said you weren't feeling well." Sarah said as she stood.

"Yeah, well the walk really cleared my head." I said. "I'm fine now. C'mon." I motioned for Billy to follow me. He stood and so did Sarah.

"No." Sarah said as she stepped toward me. "We should talk about..."

I raised my brows and crossed my arms as I waited for her to continue.

"About..." She trailed off.

Silence fell over us.

"You can't even say her name." I said. "Dad told me everything by the way."

Her face flattened out. I started to walk away but she grasped onto my arm.

"Stay." She pleaded.

I wrenched my arm from her. Billy looked between us helplessly.

"I'm leaving." I said.

Sarah stared as the three of us left, her eyes bloodshot and shining with unshed tears.

...

The door shut behind us and we were enveloped by the grey world. Joyce walked ahead of Billy and I before she turned to me.

"Are you gonna be okay, sweetie?" She asked with compassion crinkling her brow.

I nodded but I knew she could see the redness around my eyes. I hadn't seen my reflection in a while, but I knew from the soreness that the edges of my eyes would be no other color than blood red.

"You sure?" She asked.

I nodded again as I glanced at Billy whose eyes were on Joyce. I wondered if he noticed the difference in how Sarah had treated me versus how Joyce was. Joyce was just as I imagined a mother should be. Did Billy long for a mother? Maybe he did... meanwhile, I had three: one who had died, one who lied and one who I was not related to by blood. Guilt stirred in my stomach like rainwater into storm drains and my eyes began to sting and moisten. I blinked the tears away.

"I've got to hurry to work." She said. "But I can drive you to school first, if you need me to."

My eyes settled on Billy who had readjusted his gaze to the concrete floor of the driveway.

"Billy can take me." I said. He looked up at me, startled, before he nodded.

Joyce pursed her lips. "Promise me you'll get to school?"

I looked from her to Billy and then back again. Joyce's forehead creased as she looked between Billy and I. I knew she sensed the tension between us as if it were electric energy zipping and tingling through the air.

She finally, and slowly, nodded.

"I'll leave you two." She said as she stepped backward. "Just please go to school. Don't get into any trouble."

"Trouble?" I let a smile grow. "We never get into *any* trouble."

"Sure, you don't." Joyce smiled back, somewhat nostalgically, before she walked to her car. She got in. The engine popped into life and she drove away.

"What was that about?" Billy asked. "With your mom, I mean."

How could I spring even more information on him? What if I told him and he decided it was enough? What if he left me? What would I

do? I'd be alone again, and even with Steve and Jonathan and Joyce I'd still feel as lonely as I had before Billy had stomped into my life.

"It was nothing." I lied. "Why'd you go to my house?"

"I already told you," Billy looked from his car to me. "I-I was worried. You never miss school. When class finished, I tried calling your house but there was no answer. I drove to yours and your mom answered the door and invited me in. She didn't see you leave this morning and was worried about you. But she completely changed when you walked in with Byers."

"She was probably jealous." I grabbed his hand and pulled him to the car.

"Yeah, I'd say so." He scoffed. "She said you told her about me."

"I did."

"What'd ya say?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing important."

"Oh." He said, disappointed as he opened his car door.

"Well, I wasn't gonna tell her about how you've been corrupting her daughter..." I trailed off.

I'm not her daughter.

My face went flat and my nose tingled. Billy, knowing something was off, frowned and placed his hand atop the car.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"Nothing. Let's go." I opened my door and climbed in.

Billy tapped on the car for a moment before he climbed in and started the engine. The familiar purr turned into a roar as he drove away from the grey house.

...

Billy and I sat in science, copying the homework Mr Stevens' wrote on the chalk board. Each letter written with the white chalk scraped across the black surface and added to my aching nerves. I needed to tell Billy about my dad. But how would I tell him?

"Christ." Billy said under his breath as if sensing my inner turmoil but from the way he scrawled the homework into his notebook I could tell he was just pissed by how long the assignment was. Just as I finished writing the bell rang signalling the end of third period. 2 more to go. The students, including Billy and myself, began to pack away our things and stand to leave.

I was about to say that I needed to speak with him when he said;

"I've been thinking," Billy started.

I couldn't help but feel relieved that he'd interrupted. It gave me more time to just pretend to be the old me, the version of me whose parents wilfully ignored her for 'business' rather than 'top secret government business'. The girl who at least *had* parents.

"Oh no. Nothing good ever happens when you do that." I said as zipped up my bag and slung it onto my shoulder.

"Would you shut the fuck up?" He said as a smile lit up his face.

I laughed.

"Would you refrain from using such language in my classroom, Mr Hargrove?" Stevens' said with his arms crossed and legs parted as he stood as if planting his feet so that a strong gust of wind wouldn't blow him down. "You've already earned yourself detention for the rest of the semester. I wouldn't want for you to do anything else that might smear your already *glowing* reputation."

The few members of the class still here aptly watched Billy. They knew he wouldn't let what Stevens said slide. But Billy didn't say anything. He bit the inside of his cheek and stared down Stevens before finally opening his mouth.

"Sorry, Sir." He sounded polite although I hear the bite between his words.

"That's uh..." Stevens' began. It was the first time I'd seen the man caught off guard. "...very polite of you, Mr Hargrove. You're forgiven."

"Thank you, Sir." Billy said and gave a tight-lipped smile.

I smirked at Billy as we left the classroom and entered the bustling hallway.

"Wow, you really are turning over a new leaf, aren't you?" I said, barely hiding my amused expression.

"Fuck you." He said. "I only did it for our deal."

"Huh?"

"Y'know the deal where if someone forgives me, you have to kiss me." He smirked. "Remember, dumbie?"

"Uh, I'm not a dumbie, and yes, I do remember but that was only if the kids, Steve and Jona-" Before I finished speaking he told me to 'c'mon' as he dragged me over the exit and pushed through the doors. He led us through the parking lot and over to the toilets where Max had her first period – a place which was normally deserted apart from the odd student taking the long way to gym class.

His mouth captured mine as the door closed behind us. I was pushed up against the tile as his searching fingers reached the bottom of my dress and palmed my legs. I didn't wear tights today and had chosen to risk wearing only a knee length dress. I thanked my past self for this decision as Billy's fingers scratched along my skin as they moved up. And up and up. Until they finally reached their target.

"Billy!" I gasped, breaking the kiss. Billy continued down onto my neck, kissing, sucking and nipping the skin there with sharp teeth. I pushed gently at his shoulders. His hands stilled on the back of my upper thighs.

He pulled back with a pop of his lips leaving mine.

"What?" He asked, dishevelled and out of breath.

"You can't do that here."

"Do what?" He smirked as he leant into my skin. I could feel the vibrations of what his words as they parted his lips. "Finger you?"

He placed a wet his to my neck. I shivered.

"Fuck you?" He said before he planted another kiss lower than the first.

"What if someone walks in?" I asked as I tried to ignore his thumbs as they smoothed the skin under my panties.

"Someone could've walked in when we were in showers the other week." He said as he nuzzled further into my neck. "But they didn't."

"I'm just- I don't want to get caught doing something like that."

He placed another wet kiss onto my flesh. "We won't though." Billy said against the skin of my neck. He parted from my skin and looked at me with heated blue eyes which pleaded for release.

"We shouldn't do that anyway." I shook my head. "Not yet."

"Not yet?" He pulled back to look at me, something unreadable in his expression, a certain lightness in his eyes that I'd never seen before. His thumbs continued smoothing the skin of my thighs, before he pulled back altogether, still staring at me as he leant against the opposite wall.

"What?" I asked, eyebrows drawing together.

He licked his lips. He still looked at me, loose smile on his face quickly turning into a somewhat scared expression.

"What is it?" I moved forward, pushing a curl of his hair away from his face, skin hot to the touch.

The pained expression left and was masked by his normal cocky smirk.

"You're a *tease*." He said before pulling me in for a wet kiss.

"Ugh! And you're an asshole."

"But you love- love it." He stumbled.

"Maybe I do." I teased.

"Oh?" He leaned his hips into mine.

I gave him a coy smile. In his eyes, I saw my brown ones staring back. I shared my eye color with Steve and my *uncle*... but I did not share the same color as my mother, my true mother. I felt my features fall.

"Hey," Billy cupped my cheek. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"It's..." I said.

The bell rang and I jumped from the noise.

"Saved by the bell." I sniffed.

I tried to part from him but he held onto my face, cupping my cheeks with a soft grip.

"I'm fine." I said as I tried to shake him off.

"Oh, really?" He asked.

"Yes, really." I pulled his hands from my face.

The lines across his forehead told me he wasn't convinced.

"Earlier, you said you were thinking about something?" I said, changing the subject.

He didn't speak for a moment, instead he breathed out a sigh before he allowed the subject to be dropped.

"Yeah, I was thinking..." He pulled me closer to him, using the backs of my thighs as leverage. "We haven't had a proper date yet. That's what normal couples do, right? Date. And we need some normal right now."

Which is exactly why I shouldn't tell him about what I found out. But how could I not? How could I pretend to be normal? I would try to be though, for his sake.

"Yeah?" I smiled despite the tears forming.

"*Nightmare on Elm Street* is playing." He rested his hands on my waist.

"There's no way I'm watching that." I blinked away the tears.

"Really?"

"Nuh uh." I shook my head.

"Then what else are we gonna watch?"

"How about *Falling in Love*?" I said.

"How about something without 'love' in the title?" He said, his lip curled.

I tilted my head and narrowed my eyes. "I'm not watching something with the word 'nightmare' in it."

His tongue dragged across his lip.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Fine!" He said. "We'll watch your stupid movie."

"Great!" I smiled, triumphant. "When? Tonight?"

"What about now?"

"But we have class."

"Do we?" He asked, playing clueless.

I rolled my eyes.

"We missed the first and second period." Billy huffed as he removed his hand from my waist and checked his watch. "And we've missed the start of this period. So, what's the point in staying all day, huh?"

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"Dead serious."

...

We made it to the parking lot and escaped high school. Metallica rocked the car and sent vibrations all along my body and for the first time in a while I felt youthful – like I was acting my age for once and not being brought down by the events in Hawkins. I rolled the window down and let the cold air dance with my hair.

"I love this." I said, voice small.

Billy turned the speaker down.

"Huh? What'd ya say?" He said.

"I said, 'I love this'. Y'know, being free." I said as our eyes locked.

"Me too." He smiled and the engine purred.

...

We entered the movie theatre with our drinks as the ads played. The entire theatre was empty, so we sat at the back and started to chat. Billy kicked his feet up on the chair in front of him, crossing his legs at the ankle as his hands joined over his waist.

My chest was still flooded with adrenalin. I couldn't believe I skipped school twice in one day, or that I had even skipped school at all.

"You've corrupted me." I said.

"I have?" He asked, eyebrow raised.

"Don't play innocent." I said. "If you'd never come here, I wouldn't have smoked weed or told Mr Stevens to shove it up his 'saggy old ass'..." Billy laughed. "...and I would not be skipping school right now."

"And you would'a never sucked my dick." He said.

I felt my neck flush. I lightly whacked his arm.

"Ouch." He said, teasingly.

I raised my head and stared at the screen to make it clear that I was ignoring him. A Coca Cola ad was playing and cast red light onto our skin. White dust swirled over head in the light from the projector. Soon the movie began to play and the quiet film full of soft voices and scores became background noise. Billy and I sat there in red velvet seats aware of each other's bodies sat so close and so isolated from Hawkins. The air around felt tense, electric, which made it feel as if the movie was watching us and not the other way around.

I lifted my drink from the end of the chair arm and brought it to my mouth. I sucked on the straw and pulled the lemonade up. I swallowed and licked the sweetness from my lips. I thought I saw Billy stare out of the corner of my eye. I placed the drink back down and left my hand on the arm with the palm facing up. In my peripherals I saw his hand rise slowly. The back of his hand flirted with my thumb. He brought it up further and traced his finger tips along mine before he traced the lines on my palm. He then traced along the skin on my inner wrist. His hand paused before it slowly moved to my mid-thigh. I chewed on my lip and tried to quiet my breathing. His fingers moved further along my bare leg and slipped under my dress. My eyes fell closed as he traced the line of underwear.

He removed his hand and broke me away from the trance. I furrowed my brow at him.

"Let's leave." He said with a smirk.

"Where're you planning?"

"My house." He whispered.

I raised an eyebrow.

"It's empty right now. No one should bother us if we..."

"If we what?" I asked.

He glanced at me with heated eyes. "What do ya think we're gonna do?"

...

Billy's house sat quiet and surrounded by naked trees swaying behind it. Shivers ran along my spine as we walked through the front door and into his house. It looked the same as last time, with everything in its place and everything being white – the walls, the ceilings, the furniture (apart from the hideous green couch in the living room and the black exercise equipment).

We took our shoes off and the only sounds heard was the rustle of our clothes and the rubber of our shoes against the wooden floor.

"This way." Billy said.

He walked ahead, and I followed through the narrow hallway until he came upon a door. He opened it with slight hesitation and I realised it must be his room. Maybe he was shy to let me see it but then again Billy had probably had other girls over before, right? A knot of jealousy throbbed in my stomach.

He held the door open for me and I walked in. It smelled like Steve's room – like how one might imagine a teenage boy to smell.

"It's not much." He said, looking around. "The one I had before was bigger."

"I like it."

"You do?"

I nodded.

It was small but that's what made it homely. He had a wardrobe, a mirror next to a blonde bikini model (the jealousy in my stomach throbbed again when I saw her and how much our looks differed), a stereo under his window and a Metallica poster by his bed. *His bed...* I chewed on my lip.

He caught me looking at his bed and smirked. "Go sit on the bed."

I walked across the room and stood before it. I wasn't sure what end to sit on. I could sit by at the top but did he really want my butt near his pillow? I could sit on the end but would that be too far away from him? I settled on the middle, not too far away from him and nowhere near his pillow. I awkwardly sat and tucked my dress under my legs so that it didn't ride up.

Billy went over to his wardrobe and pulled out his sock drawer. He searched around for something. I heard a rattle noise as if he had a packet of biscuits in there. Why the fuck is he bringing out biscuits? He pulled out the plastic packet before turning back to me with a smirk on his face, yet I could see the trepidation in his eyes. He held a condom wrapper between his fingers – probably from the packet he'd bought when Joyce was working a while ago. It hadn't been biscuits. My stomach sank with a feeling which matched the trepidation in his eyes and I couldn't decide whether I preferred the condom over biscuits. There was no threat of heart break from biscuits nor was there the threat of pregnancy. I wondered if many people would choose biscuits over sex, and then I began to question whether if after having sex myself would I decide to become one of those people. Biscuits *were* nice, especially chocolate ones.

"You really wanna do this?" He asked, tearing me from my thoughts before he placed the wrapper onto his bedside table.

"Do what?" I asked.

"Don't play dumb, dumbie." He said before he dragged his tongue along his lower lip.

I opened my mouth to reply but nothing came out. Silence settled over us. The first sound was his footstep toward me. Then another footstep and another until he stood before me.

"Stand up." He said.

I stood.

"I'm going to take your dress off."

"That's okay." I said.

"I wasn't asking your permission."

"Weren't you?"

"No." He breathed.

"Aren't you going to lock the door?" I asked as I glanced at it.

"My door doesn't have a lock." He said.

"It doesn't?"

"The bathroom is the only room that does." He placed his hands on my hips.

"What if someone comes in?" I asked.

"No one is supposed to be back for hours." He said.

"What if they come back early?" I asked.

"We're safe. I promise." He said after seeing my frown. "As safe as we can be."

With the upside down, the lab and his dad, I wondered how 'safe' we truly were.

"Billy?" I asked as his hands found the end of my dress.

"Yeah?" He huffed.

"What if your dad finds out you cut school-"

"What if," He paused to lick his lips. "you stop beginning sentences with 'what if?'"

"*Billy.*" I frowned.

"We both know what'll happen; the same thing that happens every time I fuck up." He shrugged.

"Then why risk it?"

"You know why." He let go of my dress and it flopped around my knees.

"Do I?"

"Jesus." He stepped back from me.

I scoffed.

"I'm trying to do something nice for you, okay?" He said. "You said that 'nothing' is wrong and that you're 'fine' and all but I can tell you're not, so... a break from school and from people would be nice for you, right? For both of us."

"So, you're cutting school and risking your dad finding out for me?" I asked as butterflies bloomed in my chest.

He pressed his lips together, not speaking although he didn't have to. I knew his answer.

"Kiss me." I said.

His eyes burnt with a gentle fire and he licked his lips but didn't come closer. I exhaled sharply as determination filled my lungs, killing off the flutters of the butterflies. *No more being a pushover, no more being a coward*, I vowed before I brought my dress over my head in one fluid motion. His eyes widened before they darkened and traversed my thighs, my stomach, my breasts.

"You really want to have sex?" He asked, his fingers twitched as they ached to touch me.

"Right now, I want you to kiss me." I moistened my lips as I reached around my back to unclasp my bra. "Then we'll go from there."

I let the bra fall. He stared, transfixed by my breasts. My nipples pebbled under his watch and a pink blush blossomed onto his neck and disappeared under his shirt. His Adams apple bobbed.

"What are you looking at?" I asked. "They're just boobs. Nothing you haven't seen before."

His eyes moved up and met mine and I knew something was different. He wasn't being his cocky, self-assured and arrogant self; he was vulnerable, and he knew he it. I wondered if he thought we'd fuck or if we'd make love. The phrase 'make love' normally made me cringe but, in this moment, there was nothing else I'd rather do with Billy. I wondered if he'd ever made love to a sun kissed girl from California like the one on his poster, or if he'd only ever fucked. I could tell there was a difference between those actions, a way you felt emotionally rather than physically, that made your chest ache with love. From the way his eyes melted into a burnt blue made it clear he hadn't ever 'made love'. This was a first for both of us.

With shaking hands, I unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it away from him. It was my turn to gawk, though the view was marred by bruises which faded effortlessly into the pink blush, I ran my hands along his chest and delicately traced his muscles.

"Well? Do you want to or not?" I asked as my chest heaved, each breathe harder than the last.

"I..." He said. "I want to. *Badly.*"

"Kiss me then." I said as I stepped forward onto my toes and crashed my mouth to his. Our mouths clumsily massaged one another with smooth lips and tongues and teeth clipping skin. I wrapped my arms around his neck as his hands grabbed at my thighs and pulled me up. As he carried me to the bed, instinct guided me to wrap my legs around his waist. I could feel his straining erection beneath his tight jeans and I pressed my heat against it, making him growl into my mouth.

We collapsed on his bed with our bare and slick chests pressed together. His heart beat into my chest as I knew his hips longed to beat between my legs. He kissed down my neck and finally found my puckered nipples. He took one in his mouth as his hand played with the other. I intertwined my fingers into his hair and pulled as I wrapped my legs around his waist. I moaned as he bit me.

His necklace dangled between us as he sat up and undid his belt and pulled his jeans down. I sat up and tentatively put my hand on his thigh; dusted with freckles and blonde hair, stretching out from his

white briefs. I moved my hand up and pressed my palm to his bulge. His eyes fluttered closed and he tried to stifle a groan as I rubbed my hand over him. He grabbed my wrist and pushed me back down, holding my wrist hostage above us as he assaulted my neck, kissing and nipping at it with sharp teeth. He remedied each bite with a kiss.

I was too focused on him biting me to notice how he'd peeled my underwear from my skin. He took me by surprise when I felt his hand dive into the hot crevice between my legs, prying me apart with rough fingers as he pressed his thumb to the sensitive bundle of nerves. He tugged and played at it and traced a finger at the opening. And then his hand was gone and was shoving his briefs down half way down his legs with small jerks. With nothing between our flesh, it became very real to me that this was going to happen; I was going to lose my virginity. We were going to be lovers, and that word would be forever cemented by this act – the act of two teenagers exploring each other's bodies with clumsy hands and fingers and tongues. Earlier in his car, I'd expressed how truly free I felt, but as I kissed Billy, I realised that nothing made me feel freer than the touch of his skin to mine.

As I swallowed a lump in my throat, I looked between us and there was his cock. It strained and pulsed with need for me; I had made it look like that, I had made him desperate and hard for me. And he was going to push all of himself inside of me. I spread my legs further apart and felt myself ache to be touched.

He lined up our hips and pressed his chest to mine, crushing me under his weight and warmth – a warmth which felt like the sun beaming down in summer – before holding himself up with his hands.

When he entered, I didn't feel a tearing pain. It stung. But when Hannah had told me about her first time, she'd made it seem as though she'd been ripped open. But I leant the pain mostly came from the opening and the muscles which clamp around his heated length and all at once try to push him out yet suck him in.

"Fuck... tight. Too fucking tight." He whispered into me, the words strangled as they met my neck. He moved his head up and his eyes landed on mine and he asked. "...good?"

I nodded and moved my hips into his and while I gasped at the new angle, he tried to stifle his moan. He was only half way in so I moved my hips once more, trying to take more of him in. I couldn't speak, couldn't make to clear that I needed him to tunnel into me, to take me hard and fast. Thankfully he understood what the jerk of my hips meant and readjusted himself around me, placing his hand under my butt and holding tight as he drew back. I sighed in frustration as he drew out of me, almost to the tip, but gasped when he thrust in with one violent move of his hips. He was in all the way and pressed snugly up against my womb. He pulled out again and pushed back in. With his quick thrusts the last vestiges of pain faded and dripped into pleasure. Soon the pleasure began to stream though me and roll into violent waves. My toes curled.

He reached between us and pressed his fingers to my slick before he brought his fingers to my clit. He played with the nerves and soon I was writhing in pleasure. This was everything I hoped would happen for my first time, but it was better because it wasn't with some faceless prince charming; it was with brash and arrogant Billy Hargrove, who was so much more than what he shown other people.

My walls were still shuddering as sweat from his chest dripped onto mine and pooled on my stomach, mingling with own sweat until the sweet smell of sex filled our nostrils. He rocked into me over and over and I never wanted it to end. For it to continue until the end of our lives would be a very sweet thing... but he thrust into me with shallow and sharp movements of his hips, his face scrunched up and his long eyelashes fluttered before he groaned one last time. Our hands intertwined, and he spent inside me. My walls clamped around him one final time.

Afterward, he lay atop me with our chests still slick against one another's and my nipples still pebbles under his skin. My fingers combed through his smooth hair and soon enough he was asleep. His necklace sat on my chest and I picked it up and stroked along the metal figure of some nameless saint. I wondered if she watched over us.

In the warm glow of the sunlight streaming in through in his window, I felt truly content.

My eyelids became heavy and one resounding thought carried me to sleep;

So, this is love.

...

That's my first sex scene shared with anyone so it might've been a bit shitty but I hope you enjoyed it!

Anon: Thanks so much for your review! And I totally get you. Sometimes fanfic writers who write mean/bad characters (e.g. The Joker) don't really stick to what the character would actually do and that kind of annoys me a lil bit. That's why I've tried to be as mean as possible when writing Billy. I studied a lot of his scenes (which was very fun since he's a great actor) to try to guess what he'd say/do. Also, in my research I found out that Dacre was told to study Jack Nicholson which makes Billy seem even more horrible yet kind of cool. I also tried to tone him down gradually so that he cares more about his actions when he's around Clare. Clare makes him want to be better and I hope I got that across in my writing.

If you want more, check out my Steve/OC by clicking on my bio.

I'd love to hear what you thought about this chapter

20. Ooze

I wanted to do some big long epic chapter to make up for taking so long to update but I ended up doing something pretty average sized sorry. Hopefully I will update much sooner this time because I've really missed Billy and Clare :'(

Thank you for being patient with me xx

I haven't edited either so... enjoy!

Chapter 20: Ooze

'...Stuck in my cocoon, I'm consumed by the feeling that I'm running out of room, like I can't breathe, like I need to bloom and escape from this place that I'm trapped in, flapping my wings as the butterfly I can be...' by zamir - too late

Tuesday 4th December 1984

The woods behind Tina's cabin were thick and dark. The air which swam through the towering trees threatened to fill my chest with smoke as thick as blood which was hot and red and ready to burst from my oesophagus like water from a pipe.

"You're so funny." The little girl spoke, her voice coming from behind.

I spun around. Vines crackled under my feet.

In the middle of a clearing, the obsidian colored vines had formed a table along with four chairs made of the same purple vines. Two of the chairs remained empty, one was occupied with the little girl from my past dream – her white nightgown dripping with water, and her hair lay matted and damp on her small shoulders as it had before – and the chair across from her... I could never forget the face of who sat there, the face of the girl from the lost posters all those months ago. Her skin was pale and soggy, allowing for thick purple veins to be seen creeping underneath her skin as if her insides were filled with the vines which formed everything else in the upside down.

"Barbara?" I asked.

I trod to the table and raised a hand to touch Barbara but before my fingers met her I drew my hand back, unsettled by the deadness which had settled in her. Barbara's eyes were clear – marble like – and offered me no sign of humanity.

"So, that's her name?" The little girl giggled as she raised her tea cup to her mouth. Her giggle seemed to echo through the trees like howling wind. "I named her Barbie."

"Barbara, can you hear me?" I asked the frozen figure. I looked down and found her ankles were wrapped in the blue vines, trapping her here. "Barb? I know your sister. Please talk to me. I can tell Jude what you say, just speak."

There was no recognition in her eyes when I mentioned Jude, no movement in her slumped posture which suggested she could hear me. There was only the stillness which came with death.

"Sit down and have tea with us." The little girl said before she sipped at the cup.

My eyes found the little girl's and I stared into her blue orbs as I searched for any sign of deceit. Her eyes were so clear they almost matched Barbara's, but the little girl was alive – as far as I could tell – and Barbara was still motionless.

I sat on the empty chair and made sure my eyes never left the little girl.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked.

The little girl placed her tea cup on the table and delicately picked up the teapot and poured it into an empty tea cup. My eyes widened when I discovered it wasn't air which came from the teapot, it was blackened sludge. It sloshed into my cup and made my stomach twist.

"Drink." The little girl said as she held it out to me.

I shook my head, having no intention of drinking it.

"It's nice and warm." She said, doing her best to convince me.

I looked to Barb who sat motionless and then back to the girl's big moon eyes and then to the sludge in the tea cup. It seemed to move and bubble up toward me.

"I-I can't drink that." I said.

"Why?" She asked, head tilted as her eyes grew larger.

"It... it... it looks disgusting." I said, brow creased.

"That's rude." She frowned. "Barbie worked hard on that."

"Barbara made it?" I asked. "How? I thought she couldn't move."

"She can."

"Why isn't she moving now then?" I asked.

"Umm, I don't know if I can tell you. But if you play tea party with me... and drink the tea... maybe then I could tell you."

"You want to make a *deal*?" I asked.

"Mmhmm." Her head resembled a bobble-head as she nodded. I didn't fail to notice the slight smirk on her mouth. It looked familiar.

"That's not going to happen." I said as I leant back in the chair.

"Why?" She asked with her small forehead crinkled. I could have sworn her eyes flashed red.

"I don't trust you."

"You should." She said, and a dog distantly barks. Was it a dog or a demidog?

I felt snakes slide around my ankles and hold me tight to the chair. I pulled at them. They didn't come loose. Another snake – a vine – wrapped around my waist. I pulled at this one too. I clawed at it. But it wouldn't let me go. The more I struggled, the tighter it became. I was trapped.

"He's here." The little girl says. "You should've drank it. You can't run,

not now, not anymore."

"Run from what?"

"From *It*." She said.

My eyes travelled up from her to the sky. Thunder crackled and boomed as lighting lit up the violent clouds. It was there; the smoke monster. It twisted in the sky and looked right at me. It descended. My heart pounded. It reached the edge of the table...

So, this is what it felt like to stare into the face of evil? It was oddly calm despite the pounding in my chest.

I choked on a gasp as my eyes opened. My lungs burnt as I coughed and sputtered. My stomach growled. But I wasn't *there* anymore; there was a mattress beneath me, not a chair made from woven vines; Billy's arm was wrapped around my waist, not a snake; Billy's ankles tangled with mine which had kept me from kicking in my sleep. Had that been why I hadn't been able to run? Had Billy's limbs kept me from escaping *It*?

I couldn't stop thinking, my mind was racing. My eyes began to sting.

Why was I seeing a little girl? Who was she? Why Barb? I couldn't believe Barbara had been there. She had been so lifeless. All the memories I had of her were from the lost posters around town – a black and white version of who I assumed to be a vibrant girl. Now, when I actually saw her in color, she was lifeless.

Poor Nancy, losing your best friend hurts – it fucking sucks. And Jude had lost her sister. I could never imagine losing Steve, not now we were close.

And that thing, '*It*' the little girl had called it, had nearly gotten me. But then I woke up in Billy's warm arms. But why did I still feel cold inside? Like there was something swimming in my stomach?

My eyes filled with tears and I didn't even try to hold in my sob. One escaped my throat and Billy stirred next me. I sucked in a half-sob as I tried to quieten and watched with wide eyes as his long eyelashes fluttered. A moment passed, a moment where the tension was as

thick as that black sludge, before he stilled. I covered my mouth with my hand and tried to get my breathing to settle.

My puffy eyes scrunched as I thought about *blood*. I had probably bled all over his sheets! Why was I stupid enough to fall asleep here? Oh my gosh, Billy was going to leave me... he'd think I was gross... but he couldn't leave after we'd had s-sex. Could he?

I struggled to pull my head up to look at my body. I couldn't see over my breasts and the wall of his arm, so I gently removed his arm. He stirred again and thankfully didn't wake. I looked down to the sheets and my eyes grew big with what I found, or rather what I did not find.

After my nightmares, for the first time in weeks there was **no blood**.

I suppose that wasn't true; there was blood, but only a few small dots on the inside of my thigh likely from sex. There was nothing else, no copper smell, no gathering of red on the sheets. There was only the evidence Billy and I were now *lovers*.

My eyes got bigger. Billy and I had sex. In his bed. And we were both naked right now. My hands went to cover my breasts – which was stupid, yes, he wasn't awake and there was no one else around to see me but still I felt I needed to cover myself. I tentatively looked at him and watched his bruised stomach rise and fall with deep breathes. It would be a few more days until he healed fully.

My nose tickled, and more tears came as I thought of how he'd gotten those bruises. All the pain Billy had been through would've been enough to end some people. And I wasn't just thinking about the physical pain, there was also the emotional side.

I lay down next to him and brought my hand to his face. I caressed his cheek and let his eyelashes tickle my fingertips. They were soft. Like feathers. I brought my face closer to him and nestled into his neck. I could hear his heart beat a soft yet solid lullaby.

"Are you awake?" He whispered.

I sniffed and burrowed into him more.

"Hey, what's wrong?" He smoothed a hand down my back.

A sob escaped me.

"Clare?" He said, his rough voice barely above a whisper.

"It's not okay." I said.

"Huh? What isn't? Do you regret what we...?"

"No, God no. It's just... just... your bruises."

His breathing stills as does his hand on my back.

"Your dad..." I said. "He shouldn't..."

"I know."

"And I know you don't want to tell anyone."

"I don't." He gritted out.

"But don't you see that you should. He should be locked up-"

"Stop." His body separates from mine. He climbed over me and stumbled onto his floor before he reached down to grab his boxers. He slid them up his legs and I mourned the last glimpse of his butt.

"Wait." I said as I wrapped his sheets around my breasts. I stepped from his messy bed and onto the wooden floor.

"I don't want to talk about it." He said, voice firm as he turned to me with fire in his eyes. "Somehow it always come back to this with you. 'You should tell someone, Billy!'" He imitated me. "It's not normal, Billy! Yeah, I fucking know and it sucks but I'm not telling anyone! They'll just ship me off to some foster place where no one gives two fucks about me. The way I see it, I've got one year left until I'm eighteen and then I'm outta here. I'm going back to California! Or anywhere else other than this shitty town. So, no, I'm not telling anyone. It's bad enough you found out."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I hate how you act all concerned about me." He said, his jaw tight.

"I'm not acting." I sniffed.

He scoffed.

"Billy," I said as I stood and held the sheet to my body. "None of this is an 'act'."

He inhaled sharply, deeply, before letting it leave in one thrust of his lungs. He looked at the wall behind my head, avoiding my eyes just as he wanted to avoid this conversion.

"You think I'm faking? You think I'm not totally crazy about you?"

He avoided my eyes as I came closer.

"I'm not faking." I stepped into his space and pressed my hands to his chest. The sheets held onto my chest, clinging to my breasts as I pressed a kiss above his heart. "This is *real*. We've... y'know, *done it*. And I'm not letting go of you now." I said into his skin. "I promise I won't talk about it again. Only if he does it again – well, only if you want to talk, y'know. Because I'm here. I'll be here for a long time now. As long as you want me. And I want you to let me in. I want you to trust me."

Time passes. Instead of pushing me away, his arms circled my waist.

"I want to... to trust you and tell you things but... I don't like talking about, y'know, sappy shit."

I drew my head back from his chest and looked him in the eyes. His were crisp. Mine were watery.

"I never used to either." I said. "I *hated* sharing my pain with anyone. This is a little off topic or maybe it isn't but... um, my gramma used to make these really nice Welsh cakes, she was half-Welsh, and she passed on her skills in the kitchen to Steve. Anyway, every St. David's Day she would cook a boat load of them and I'd get so fat! Mom-mom would tell her off for fattening me up. 'She'll get too big for her dresses' and all that... Gramma died when I was six. I haven't had a

Welsh cake since."

I thought back to the little black dress I'd been forced into, a size too small probably. I tried to picture my gramma before the funeral, but I found I could not. It had been an open casket and all memories of before I saw her still form had evaporated from my mind like water on a hot day. As they lowered her brown coffin, I had wondered why my parents had hugged, albeit rigidly. It was a foreign show of intimacy from them and it was my only memory of them doing anything like that.

I gathered saliva in my mouth and swallowed it, desperate to end the ache of a dry throat.

"Death wasn't real back then, was it? Kids can't even begin to understand it. Or know how to react to it. I just remember thinking 'who's going to make me Welsh cakes now?'" I said as I let out a sad laugh.

Billy's eyes filled with understanding. His grief mirrored my own.

"I was thirteen, I think, when Hannah did what she did. I felt like I couldn't talk to anyone. She was my only friend. And then she was gone. It was like my gramma all over again. Only this time, I knew what Death was. I knew it hurt more than never eating Welsh cakes again. I didn't know how to cope. So, I stopped talking. I stopped *being*. It was like I had died too. And then the nightmares started. I had 'episodes'. I saw things. I thought I saw her more than once..."

Billy's arms tightened around my waist and I temporarily lost where my story was going.

"...I don't know if you've heard any rumours about me...?"

"Not really." He said, voice thick. "Tommy said something about you."

"I'm not surprised he did." I scoffed. "If you hear a rumour about my nervous breakdown in school, it's true. Maybe it's been a bit *embellished* by a few individuals, but the basic story is true. And of course, my parents heard about it. It was the final straw for them, so they shipped me off to Logansport State Hospital where their loony

daughter was nowhere to be seen and laughed at. I was alone there too, for a while. And then the doctor they assigned to me turned out to be pretty cool."

"Pretty cool', huh?" He was teasing but pain was still fresh in his eyes. He was trying to block it out, and I was glad he chose light teasing over ignoring or shouting.

"Yeah." I let a small laugh escape. "He taught me how to talk things through – mainly with myself, but also with other people. He said it was bad to bottle things up and I still do it sometimes but not as much as I used to. You should take his advice. It's nice to get things off your chest. Example; you're the first person I've told about my gramma. It felt nice."

"Nice?" He murmured.

"It did." I said.

"It did?" He said.

"Yeah, now stop copying what I say."

"Okay." A timid smile spread onto his lips. "Wanna shower now?"

"Are you saying I smell?" I teased.

"Of course, I am." He smirked.

"Only because of... y'know."

"I *do* know. And I plan to do it a lot with you from now on." His tongue wet his lower lip.

"Oh really?" I said, cheeks tinted pink.

He leant forward and captured my lips.

...

We stood in his off-white tiled shower as the water gracefully slid from our skin, its warmth soothing itself into our bodies before it left

us and swirled down the drain. Though we were both reluctant to wash off the scent of sex, we took turns at scrubbing along each other's bodies with his soap. At least I'd smell like his soap and maybe tonight, when I was alone in bed I'd be comforted by the scent. Hopefully it would sooth me into a dreamless sleep. I really didn't want to attend another of the little girl's tea parties.

"Wanna go again?" He asked as he washed his soap onto my back.

"I'm sore." I whined, playful.

"Aww, poor little princess." He whined, letting his bottom lip jut out and quiver like a leaf.

"Shut up." I said, trying to conceal my smile.

He looked at me with narrowed eyes.

A smirk spread onto his lips.

He was swift in his attack.

His arms slid under my bum. He pulled me up against him and our slick bodies slid against each other's. Our feet squeaked against the tile as we wrestled.

"Billy!" I squealed as I clung to his shoulders, though they were wet and I couldn't get a grip on them.

Billy ceased his attack, laughing into my shoulder. I wrenched away from him, but I slipped. My foot squeaked against the tile before I clung to Billy like a wet cat. He laughed harder. I balanced myself and was determined not to slip again.

"Jerk." I said as I snatched the soap from him and I turned my back before I continued to wash my body. He was still sniggering to himself behind me and I couldn't stop my insides from melting at his joy.

This moment was snatched from us as the water ran cold. We hissed and swore as we scrambled out of the tub to escape the sudden change in temperature before we found solace on the bathmat.

"The fuck?" Billy cursed as he reached in to turn shower off. "That's never happened before."

He turned to me with water dripping from him. His skin was paler now, though not as ghost white as mine.

My mouth parted.

My eyes widened and I tried – desperately so – to avoid looking at his... his area. Even though this *thing* had been inside of me not long ago, I still didn't feel comfortable looking at it. Nor did I feel comfortable with his heavy gaze on my body and for this reason, my arms covered my breasts and my legs clamped together.

Billy saw the empty towel rack and walked over to the cupboard without so much as a care to his nudity and opened the drawer.

"Oh." He said.

"What?" I said, shivering.

"No towels." He said.

"I'm freezing."

"Guess we'll have to warm each other up."

"No, I actually am sore. I don't wanna..."

"Fuck?"

"No, I don't want to *fuck*." I said, huffing. "Can you go find some towels? Please?"

"Alright, fine. Back in a sec." He said, brow creased as he left the room. The door closed behind him and the empty towel rack shook with the force of it.

I rolled my eyes at the door and breathed out forcefully, an action I immediately regretted as my breath fanned over the tops of my breasts and made me cringe into myself as gooseflesh rose.

I decided that walking would warm me up until Billy came back and so my feet padded over to the foggy mirror above the sink and I grimaced at my blurred reflection. I reached up to it and drew a smiley face over where my own features should've been clearly reflected to me.

I decided that with the water stained basin, the linoleum floor which appeared to have once been a checker pattern but was now faded, and the naked 40-watt bulb which jutted out from the grimy tiled wall above the mirror that the previous owners of this house hadn't cared for it much. Perhaps the Hargrove's hadn't gotten around to redecorating this room yet and that was why it was still was not a very cheery room.

The pipes rattled, and the sink gargled.

I looked up to the mirror and my breath caught in my throat and swiftly formed into a lump. The face I had drawn dripped and appeared to be crying.

The sink gargled again. The face carried on dripping. Another gargle came but this sounded like a... it couldn't be? Could it?

"Hello?" I asked, trepidation heavy in my gut.

"Clare." It said.

The sink had just spoke to me. I jumped back against the back wall, putting distance between the sink and I. The face above the sink still dripped down slowly and the pathways the drips had taken made the mouth look as if it had garish fangs.

"What... who?" I said.

"Come closer." It sounded like it was choking on something wet and thick.

"Where are...?"

"I'm in the sink. Come see." It said.

I stared at the face and then at the sink. I took one step closer.

"It's me." The choking voice said. "Come closer. Come here."

I stopped at the half way point and turned my eyes to the door.

"Don't leave me." It choked out, louder this time.

"Why? Who are you?" I looked at the smiley face.

"I'm need your help. I'm lost." It whined.

I took one more step, eyes drawn to the sink. Thoughts of the door and of Billy and of escaping were fading fast as I took the final steps and peered over the ceramic sink. The sinkhole gargled as I searched its black depths. The sink's gargle turned into a stomach rumbling. Its hunger called out, needing something to sink its teeth into.

"Come play with me." It hissed. "It's me, Georgie."

"Georgie?" I asked. "His sister? But, but you drowned..."

"And now I'm stuck down here. Come play." It gargled.

"How am I talking to you right now?" I said. "How is this possible? You're... dead."

"This isn't the first time we've talked, dumbie."

"We've talked before?" I searched through my memories but came up with nothing. The last time I'd spoken to a little girl had been the one from my dreams, the one with blue moon for eyes, dark blonde hair and what would have been a flowing nightgown if not for how wet it was... wet... the girl from my dreams had always been soaked through. She looked as if she had dived into cold waters and stayed there until her fingers became numb and her skin pruned and turned a light blue.

"You're her?" I asked. "Billy's little sister?"

The sink went quiet and I did not receive an answer. Nothing happened. The face did not drip. The pipes didn't rattle or rumble. The sink was silent. Then a black bubble emerged from the sinkhole and popped, spraying little black dots across the water stained basin.

Another bubble came, and then another. Black ooze began to spill up from the hole and fill the sink.

I leant up to get away from it but then I felt it; a pressure on my head. It forced me down. I struggled against it. The sink let out a sick growl. I pressed my hands onto the sink and pushed away but I wasn't strong enough. My legs trembled.

"Billy!" I called. "Help!"

The sink spat out more black sludge.

"Open up." The voice growled.

The pressure increased.

"Billy!" I wheeped.

"Drink it." It hissed.

I wildly shook my head. The black sludge tickled my chin and I called out once more for Billy.

...

My pacing sucks as usual but I hoped you enjoyed it anyway. I'm also really sorry that it was a cliffhanger... again.

Can you guess my inspiration for the bathroom scene?

21. Mother, Mother, Sister, Brother

(I know I said a super long chapter... but I ran out of time sorry.
It's the normal length now)

Yo, disclaimer: Any homophobic/racist views expressed are not my own views. Clare's views on homosexuality: she's lived a very sheltered life, so if any language she uses is offensive, then I apologise. I was trying to convey how someone from the 80's who doesn't know/accept as much as someone from 2018 might think.

IT'S THE ONE YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THIS STORY! WOO! It's was a struggle sometimes but all of you guys' favs, follows and kind words have kept me going. Thank you all!

I hope you enjoy this chapter! Merry Christmas!

...

Chapter 21: Mother, Mother, Sister, Brother

Fingers, long and thin and razor sharp, pressed against my scalp. Its talons embedded themselves into my skin. Red copper dripped into my eyes and fell off my flesh before merging with the black sludge. It bubbled and twisted up as more of it emerged from the rusted sink hole. A blob of it spurted fourth and hit my cheek.

Something grabbed at my shoulders and pulled me back. The unknown-something pulled me from the sink and we fell back onto the tile floor. I was grateful to be away from the spitting sink hole, yet I knew I wasn't out of danger. I whacked at the thing, trying to free myself.

"Stop." His voice broke through my panic, piercing my ears. "It's me."

"Billy..." I sobbed. I wrapped my arms around myself as I curled up between his legs. His arms came to rest around me. I nestled into his naked chest and breathed in the scent of him.

"What happened?" He asked.

"Didn't you see... see..." I said.

"No, that's why I was asking."

"There... there was this thing." I said as I pulled my head up to look in his eyes. "Didn't you see it?"

"I didn't see anything." His brow creased deeper than it was.

"But there... you didn't see *it*?" I pointed at the sink. "Go look. Billy, there's... go... there's- it was coming out of the sink..."

"It's just water." He said, his eyes searching mine. Was he worried?

Water was spurting from the broken faucet like blood from an artery, spilling onto the floor, spreading closer to us. I shrunk back and into Billy's body.

He spoke but it didn't register in my mind.

"Wait! No, *no*, wait. It got on my face. Look! Is it on me? It's on me." I scratched at my cheek.

"Don't do that to your face." Billy said as he snatched my wrist away and cradled it between his hands.

"Look, please! Is it on my face?"

"Is *what* on your face?" He asked as his thumb began to rub circles into my skin.

"The black-"

"There's nothing there!" The thumb circles stopped.

"Nothing... No, there *is*." I said, wrenching my wrist away and standing to look at the mirror. The face I had drawn had melted away. Instead, my naked reflection met me. Tears fell warm against cold red cheeks. My thumb smoothed the skin where the black mess should've been. There wasn't even a point in checking the sink hole to see if the rest of it was there. I knew it had vanished too.

A dry and bitter feeling passed through me and settled in my bones. This feeling was familiar. Had I just had another episode? Was I *bad* again? With eyes closed, I let my arms snake up to cradle my shoulders as I wept. I felt Billy move behind me. He brought something rough against my skin before wrapping me in it. He'd found a towel for me.

...

Billy, with a stony face, had gathered me up in his warm arms and carried me to his bedroom before he lay me on the bed still smelling of him and us and sex.

"Has that happened- was that an- an 'episode' or...?" He asked as he went to pick up gym shorts. He slid them up toned legs and over his behind and I reluctantly watched. The shorts were followed by a black tee which covered up his stomach and the tops of his arms. I was left in my towel.

"An episode?" I asked.

"Because if it was..."

I wasn't sure if it was.

"...I think we should tell Steve." He rubbed his hand along his forehead.

"No."

"He's your brother. They should help their little sisters. They should always know what to do. And I know me and him don't like each other but you were... and when I found you I was so-"

"Scared?" I asked.

He didn't reply.

"You were scared. Join the club." I said.

He scoffed. "I'm gonna sort out the sink. You should get some sleep."

"Don't. You can't leave me alone. Not after that."

"Look, Clare, there's no proof." He shrugged.

"What?"

"Clare-"

"Don't you mean 'Crazy Clare'?" I asked, sour.

"What?"

"You obviously don't believe me. No 'proof'?" I let out a sour chuckle. "So, you didn't believe me when I told you about the upside down and the monsters, right? There wasn't any 'proof' of that. You were there when I made the roses come back. That's evidence enough, right? Or did you just want to the fuck the freak?"

"Oh, fuck off."

"You wanted to fuck the girl with freaky powers."

"You know that isn't true." His arms crossed.

"Do I? I haven't got any 'proof' of that." I tilted my head. "How am I supposed to believe anything you say without 'proof'?"

"Oh my Go-" He cut himself off. "I don't know what I believe, okay? I just meant that all this shit about an upside down, sideways, whatever world and- and monsters is a little crazy. So, don't blame me if sometimes I have my doubts."

"A little crazy'? Don't you mean *a lot* crazy?" I asked. "Crazy like Crazy Clare."

"Christ's sake. That's not what I meant." He thrust his hands in the air. "Put yourself in my shoes. If I told you about all the shit in this town, would you believe me? And don't say you would. I know you're stubborn enough to, but don't say it or I swear to God..."

I wiped away a stray tear before running my hands through the ends of my hair. I hissed when my fingers caught a not and was made

aware of a lightly throbbing pain on my scalp.

The talons.

The talons were proof. They'd cut into my scalp and made thick blood flow from my veins. I brought my hand up to my hair and frantically felt around.

"What are you doing?" Billy said, as a hopeless glint settled in his ocean eyes.

I ignored him. My fingers searched through tresses of damp hair, the roots warmed and nearly dry from my temperature, until I found them. On the left side of my skull were two marks, still fresh and sore. I searched further and found three more, all slowly weeping blood. I brought my hand back and saw red. Billy saw it too.

"What's that from?" He asked.

"The thing that was holding me down. It was real." I said, more to myself than to him. "The nightmares *are* real."

"Maybe you just hit your head."

"And cut it open in five separate places?" I scoffed.

He shrugged. "Look, for once, I'm actually not in the mood to fight more than we already have. Just get some sleep and I'll go fix the sink."

"But-"

"I'll stay until you fall asleep." He said as he took a seat next to me on the bed. "You won't be alone."

"That's not the only thing I'm worried about."

He frowned.

"What if it gets you too?" I asked, sliding my hand onto his.

"It won't." He shook his head. "I promise."

"Don't make a promise you can't keep."

"What do you think is actually going on?"

"Do you want a serious answer?" My hold on his hand tightened.

"What else would I want?" He asked as his wrinkled brow deepened.

"Proof, but I haven't got any. Not any that's enough for you to believe me."

He rolled his eyes.

I racked my brain for what to tell him and then my mind clapped like lighting on one single thought; *his sister*. The little girl, with ocean eyes, matted hair and translucent skin in a soaked through nightgown was *her*. I knew it. Or maybe it was something that had taken her form.

But how would I say any of that to Billy?

'Hey, your dead sister, yeah she's haunting me.'

'Your sister, whose death you blame yourself for, yeah, she's back as a ghost who likes to have tea parties with dead Barbara Holland in the upside down.'

Best case scenario; he tells Steve and I end up in the loony bin again.

Worst case; Billy never talks to me again. And the sweet dream of him and I would be over. I don't think I'd ever care for someone like this ever again. The thought of him leaving – it was like all heat abandoning the sun in one fell swoop, leaving it a ball of useless dead rock, rotating endlessly, cold and alone in eternal dark.

I took his hand into my lap and traced along his life line. Then his heart line.

"Billy was your... please don't freak out... did you sister have blue eyes, blue like yours?"

He looked at me disgusted. I nearly aborted the whole thing and

rushed to gather my clothes and run. But then he nodded.

"And... uh, did she have tea parties?"

"...All the time." His blue eyes glistened.

"Did she want a dog?" I asked. She'd told me that before in a nightmare, just before I'd gotten the call from the vets telling me that the dog we'd saved was dead.

"We couldn't get one. Mom was allergic." His fingers took hold of mine, halting my exploration. "How...?"

"I think I can do more than bring the dead back. I think I can see them too. Dream about them." I said, vision becoming foggy.

"I..." Billy started, eyes on his window. My eyes followed his seeing the twisted forest just behind his house stirred the memories of all my dreams about the little girl. She had wanted me to drink that sludge, but I couldn't fathom why.

"Billy, I'm-"

"No. I... I can't..." He trailed off. His eyes, blue and wide and teary, were lost. They departed from the window and darted around his room, searching for meaning or something, anything to cling on to, but there was nothing. Absolutely nothing. I wanted his eyes to find mine and cling to me, but he chose not to. He instead, got up from the bed and took long steps to the door, opened it and left. I heard a door shut and assumed it was him entering the bathroom.

My nose prickled, and warmth began to trickle down my face and onto my neck, tickling the skin as it went. I wiped the wetness away. The pillow and the smell of him enveloped me as I lay back. My eyes closed in an attempt to stop the tears. But closing them only made them flow freer down the sides of my face.

...

It was dark inside his room. Despite being beneath his bedsheets, I was cold – which was my body had come to expect when Billy wasn't around.

I recalled hearing the slam of a door somewhere – it must have woken me. Who had slammed it? My heart beat faster as thoughts of talons and monsters filled my thoughts like smoke in black lungs. Trying to calm myself, I rolled over and breathed in the musky scent locked into his pillows.

Heavy footsteps and a loud voice broke the ice of silence.

"What happened to the sink?" A gruff voice demanded.

I jolted upright and held the towel tightly to my chest. Billy's voice was softer than his fathers.

"...accident... happened after you left this morning..."

As the footsteps got closer, the voices became clearer.

Billy said, "So, I took Max to school and came back and tried to fix it-"

"Who else is here? Are they responsible?"

"What? No, dad. No one is here." He pleaded. "Dad, just chill."

"Chill?" Neil asked. "The sink is broken, and you skipped school. Again."

The footsteps got closer. Neil was coming here.

I gathered up my clothes and rushed to the wardrobe. I looked back to check if I'd left anything. There was a sock. A single frilly sock which peeked out from under the bed. I stepped forward but before I could get it, the door handle began to turn. I dove into the wardrobe.

Heavy footsteps followed by lighter ones invaded the space.

"See? I told you; no one's here." Billy rasped.

"Whose shoes are by the front door, huh, boy?" Neil asked.

"I don't know! Maybe Max got new ones."

"Don't lie, you little shit." Neil growled.

"How do you know if I'm lying or not?" Billy said, challenging him.

"Maxine wears sneakers, not loafers." Neil said as a floor board creaked under him.

"Oh, paying attention to shoes now are you? Careful, people in small towns don't like fags, remember?" Billy said, toying with him. "That is why we moved here, right?"

"You're the fag here. I wasn't caught with some black boy on my cock."

My eyes widen.

Did he mean...? Was Billy...? But we'd had sex... I thought he liked girls. I thought he liked me, or was I just his cover? No, I couldn't be – his dad hated me. Why carry on with a girl if your dad hates them?

"Dad–"

"Shut it, boy." Neil growled. "And you call me 'Sir' from now on."

Silence fell, and it was as oppressive the darkness which had draped itself over my body when I had shut the door. Was Neil looking around the room for the signs of a stranger? Did he spot the sock I abandoned in my haste? Could he smell us and what we'd done? Did he note the messy bed sheets, creased and smelling of sex? Could he hear me breathing short and shallow gulps of stale air?

I covered my mouth with a clenched fist and held onto my breath. I was going under stormy waters and I wasn't sure of when I could breathe again. A tear formed from fear clung to my weak eyelashes.

I heard a heavy脚步. And then another. One after the other, all in my direction.

A final one came, and I felt the weight of a stolid form bend the wooden flooring. He was outside the wardrobe.

The tear fell from my lashes.

The handle of the door creaked under a heavy hand.

"You swear, do you?" Neil asked, voice low.

The door handle twisted. I wiped the tear away and braced myself. Dim yellow light flooded into the space. I looked up. There *he* was. Stood there. Eyes cold. Corpse-cold. And yet, full of fire and fury and *rage*. A rage I couldn't understand.

His rough hand wrapped around my arm and pulled me from the wardrobe. I held onto the towel, making sure it wouldn't fall from me.

"Dad-"

"Not only have I told you no girls in the house, but I also thought I made it clear that-"

"Dad, just..." Billy started.

"Just what, Billy? What could you possibly-"

"Mr Hargrove." I interrupted.

"What whore?" His grip tightened.

I wrenched my arm from his grip and stood back against the wardrobe, clutching at the towel. Neil's eyes – the same color as Billy's yet so starkly dissimilar – pierced into mine. His form was only inches away from mine.

"He's told me about what you do to him." I said.

His eyes remained the same. There was no panic, no shame.

My eyes found Billy, whose mouth was agape and whose eyes were full of fear.

"Leave him alone from now on." I said.

"And what are you, little miss priss, going to do if I don't. He's my son after all. I can do what I want." Neil said.

"I'm friends with Jim Hopper. Chief of police." I said, chin tilting

upward. "So, I'd suggest that you never lay another finger on him ever again."

He shook his head, scowling at me. Then a sickening smile spread across his face. He stepped from the room, never once looking at Billy. Neil closed the door, quiet and slow. His footsteps pattered down the hallway and then the front door was opened and closed. A car engine started and drifted away down the street.

He was gone. The nightmare was over. A smile took over my face. My eyes found Billy. His brow was creased with anger.

"What?" I said. "He's gone."

"For now."

"Yeah, I know. But you can always come to mine. And if he ever touches you again, I'll tell Hopper."

"Didn't we already have this conversation earlier?" He asked with arms crossed.

"What?"

"I don't want the chief knowing about this. I don't want anyone to know."

"And I won't tell them."

"But you just said-"

"It was a *threat*. He can't hurt you now because he'll think that I'll tell Hopper and he'll be locked up."

"Clare, he'll still do it. I know he will. And when he does it and doesn't go to jail, he'll know you're too chicken to tell anyone."

"But I'm not too chicken." I said.

Billy's eyes narrowed.

"I'm not saying you're chicken either."

"Of course." He rolled his eyes as he plopped down onto his bed.

"Look, if it happens again then we'll deal with it. Together. Okay?"

"I think you should get dressed." He looked at his watch. "I have to pick up Max from school soon."

"Oh, okay." I said, voice laced with disappointment.

"Do you want to come with me?" He asked.

"I'd love to."

...

His Camaro's engine growled to life beneath us.

As I got changed in his room, the silence between us grew tangible. There was one thing gnawing at my fried brain. Neil had mentioned Billy and another boy... doing *things*. And I didn't know much about those things, I'd never met anyone like that before – not to my knowledge at least. But they must be fine, despite what others preach. And if Billy was one, then that didn't change him in the slightest. He was still the most annoying prat I'd ever known. And despite this, I felt as if we were friends. Who he had liked in the past wouldn't change that, but I couldn't help the ache in my heart when I thought of him with another.

And now as we sat in his car, I had nothing yet so many things to say. My mouth opened and words came forth like vomit.

"I heard him, y'know." I said.

"About what?" He asked.

"You know."

"Do I?" He asked.

"He called you a-a 'fag' and said you... he caught you..." I mumbled. "But you... you still want me though? Right? Because if I'm just a cover for you..."

"You're not. You're not that." He said.

"Then... what? You *like-like* both or...?"

"Yeah. I guess I do. I mean, I don't know..." He trailed off, eyes on the muddy road.

"Talk to me. That's all I want right now. Talk." I sniffed as my hand lay on his knee. I caught his eyes and tried to give him strength.

"I'd never, ya'know, been with a boy before. It was new. And he was new. New to our school and we got along. My dad hated him, obviously. But we still hung out. And it just went from there."

"Sounds so normal." I said.

"It kind of was apart from the sneaking around. But then last summer, he came over to mine when Neil, Susan and Max went out. Max felt sick and they came home early."

"Your dad found you."

Billy nodded. "Look, I know it's wrong-"

"Wrong?!" I asked.

"Being with, y'know... another guy."

"That's not 'wrong'. Don't be ashamed. I mean, you've been with plenty of people... and you shouldn't be ashamed of being with any of them." I bit my lip. "Did you love him?"

His brow furrowed in thought. Jealousy as hot as a fire poker stabbed at my flesh as I thought of him and his summer lover. How thrilling that kind of love must've been. Like Romeo and Juliet.

But then Billy answered my question.

"No, I didn't. I liked him. But it wasn't love, I know that now..." His eyes pierced mine before he took a deep breath as if his next words were painful. "If you don't want to be with me now, I'll leave you alone. If that's what you want."

"What? No, that's, no I don't want that. *Ever.*" My hand tightened on his knee.

"But I would leave if you wanted. 'Cause I care about your feelings more than mine. I've never felt that way before. Not about anyone. Not ever."

"I don't want you to leave." I said. "I want you. As you are. I want all of you, for always."

"For always." He whispered.

"Well, if we're exchanging secrets, I may as well tell you one of mine."

"You're gay too?"

"Ha ha." I rolled my eyes.

"What is it?" He asked.

"You know earlier, when we were at mine and my mom- mother was there? She wanted to talk to me about something..."

"Yeah. And that 'something' is?" He asked.

"She's not my real mother."

...

Wednesday 5th December 1984

The evening settled over Hawkins like death.

"You used to sleep walk." Sarah Harrington said as she sat across from me in the living room. The pale wallpaper matched her blonde locks and I was once again reminded that she was not the woman who birthed me.

"When you were little," she carried on in a trance, "you went downstairs and brought photos up to your bed with you, all while you were asleep." She smiled sadly. "My mind keeps going back to that. Back to when you were young and cute and didn't know

anything. Back to when you didn't know anything about me and your father..."

"But he's not." I said with a voice as cold as Sarah Harrington normally was.

"No. He isn't your father." She reached out to me but then, as if realising her mistake, she withdrew her hand with a flinch and placed it over the other one in her lap. "And I'm not your mother."

"Can I tell Steve?" I asked. "I mean, I don't know why I'm asking. It's my secret. I can do what I want with it."

I stared at my reflection in the mirror which jutted out from the wall across from us. I looked older, more like Joyce. I had the veil of loss covering my eyes and I wondered if this made me an adult.

...

Thursday 6th December 1984

"So, mom and dad being back early..." Steve began as he brought the car to a stop in his usual place of the parking lot. "What do you think about that?"

"Um, there's nothing really to think." I said, leaning back against the window. I studied the students streaming in through the double doors and past the 'Go Tigers' sign and thought of whether they had normal boring lives or perhaps they all went through crazy shit like the gang and I had.

"You seem unsure." He said as his head tilted.

"I'm unsure about a lot of things." I said before I opened the door and stepped out, slamming it shut behind me. Steve followed suit and then came the slam of his door.

"You okay?"

"There's something I need to tell you." I blurted. "Some *things*, actually."

I needed to tell him about Clara Hertz, about dad (my uncle, really) working for the lab, and Billy... as much as he'd hate it, I needed to tell him I was with Billy now. And there was something else too – the dreams, no, the nightmares. I knew Steve would understand those – the bags under his eyes told me so.

"What?" He asked as he walked around the car to me.

"I-uh... I'm just not sure what to start with or how to tell you." I said as his broad shoulders blocked my sight of other students.

Just then, an angry car engine roared through the parking lot. I went on my tip toes and searched over Steve's shoulder for his Camaro. My eyes found the blue immediately.

Steve, who had followed my eyes, said, "Is this about him?"

"No, yes. Partly." I said.

"What's happened?" He frowned.

"Don't go all big brother on me, okay? Me and Billy-"

"Hargrove." Steve said, voice furnace-hot as he crossed his arms. "You used to call him Hargrove, not *Billy*. What's changed?"

"He's my..." *boyfriend*.

Steve raised an eyebrow.

"...friend." I said, unable to ignore the shame that bubbled in my stomach. I should've told him. That was my moment and I blew it.

Steve leant back against the car and all the parking lot was in view again. My eyes caught onto Billy and Max talking just like me and Steve were. Big brother, little sister. Images of Billy's other little sister stirred in my mind like water draining down a sink hole.

"What aren't you telling me?" Steve asked.

I wasn't sure if telling him about my nightmares would do anything other than worry him. Telling him about the sink incident would

mean telling him I was at Billy's house and I wasn't ready to deal with his need to protect me this early in the morning.

I was sure Billy didn't believe me about the sink. Why couldn't he just trust me? And we didn't discuss his little sister in full which was something I had to do – but not yet, if ever.

My eyes went to Billy again and watched as him and Max parted, each of them walking to their buildings. Among the waves of people, Billy vanished through the school's entrance.

"If I tell you, you'll think I've been having episodes again and I swear I haven't been." I said before biting my lip.

"What? Fuck, Clare. Is that why you saw that doctor a few weeks back?"

"No. And I told you, the doctor I saw was a body doctor, not a mental one." I shook my head. "I've been having nightmares. Bad ones."

"Same here." He said, voice gruff, as he looked behind me. Darkness settled in his eyes and replaced nearly all his warmth.

"What're yours about?" I asked as I stepped closer.

"They're the same as yours probably. They're about the Upside Down."

Silence fell over us. I leant against his car and pressed my head to his shoulder for a second before I pulled away.

"Class is going to start soon." I said. "We should get–"

"I was hoping you'd tell me." Steve said. "I thought if I steered the conversation in the right direction, you'd tell me."

"Tell you...? Tell you what?" I asked as I stepped away from the car.

"I heard you talking last night with mom. She said her and dad weren't your parents which- that's just not true. It can't be. Not when we look so much alike. How could you not be my little sister?"

"Steve..."

"It's not true, is it?" He said, eyes focused on mine.

"You're my cousin." I said. "Dad's sister – your aunt – that's my birth mother."

He shook his head, unimpressed.

"I've known for a few days now." I said.

"Oh, have you?" Steve said, sour.

"Yes."

"Who else knows?" He asked.

"Joyce. I told Jonathan about her but I don't know if he's aware that she's my birth mother..." I trailed off.

"Jonathan?" He whined. "He knows? *Him*? Oh, and for God's sake, please don't tell me Hargrove knows."

I didn't speak, instead I let silence fall over us. Steve's eyes widened.

"He knew? What, are you going around telling everyone?" He waved his hands about.

"No." I said.

"Then how come he knew before me?"

"I told you. He's my friend."

"But I'm your brother!" He said, and pain took over his features as he concluded something. "But... I'm not your brother. Am I?"

My nose started to tingle as my vision blurred. I caught a glimpse of him before he turned from me and I saw that his features mirrored mine – glassy eyes and red cheeks.

I stepped toward him and put my hand on his shoulder.

"But you are. And you'll always be my brother. My stupid over protective brother who loves to bake and baby sit and always leave the toilet seat up and hates writing stupid college essays."

"Everybody hates writing those." He sniffed.

"I like essays." I said in mock insult.

"Nerd." He said as he turned back to me, a playful smirk on his lips.

I scoffed and whacked at his arm.

"There's something else." I said, regretful that I had to drop even more on top of his shoulders.

"Fuck. What?" He asked.

"Dad worked at the lab."

...

Friday 13th October 1967

Clara Hertz

I had no money, I had no home.

Steven and Sarah's new home was decadent. White walls and cream rugs and vases spilling with flowers. It looked like those home magazines I used to read when I used to dream that one day it would all be mine – the nice house, the loving husband and the beautiful children.

"Steven, you're my brother." I said from my spot in the foyer. "Please, help me out."

He was halfway up the stairs and he looked down at me with his dark eyes.

"It's not my fault mom and dad kicked you out when you got knocked up." He said, voice cool like he didn't even care. He probably didn't.

I scoffed.

He carried on, "...and it's also not my fault that the money you did have was thrown away on medical bills because of your little car accident."

"Well, I have nothing right now." My hand pressed to my stomach. Not nothing. "My baby has no one but me."

"What about the father?" He asked, taking one step down.

"This baby doesn't have a father." I said, head tilted up.

"He skipped town then." He said, face blank.

"You say that like you're not surprised." I shook my head.

"He's 27. You're 17. Of course, I'm not surprised." He placed his hands on his hips.

"Look, I just need some place to stay or- or food or money." I said. "And I thought you – as my brother – would help me... I'm thirteen weeks along. I'll accept anything."

He took the remainder of the steps down toward me, all the while his face was wrinkled as if battling his thoughts. Then, once on the same level as me, he spoke.

"I work the legal side of things at this... place. They pay good money to run tests on pregnant women."

"What place?" I asked.

"I'll take you there tomorrow." He put his hands in his pockets as his eyes left mine.

"Amazing." Relief flooded through me. "So, I heard your wife gave birth a few months ago."

"Yes. We called him Steven Jr." He said with pride shining in his eyes as he gave a tight-lipped smile.

"Can I meet him?" I asked.

He nodded.

I smiled at my brother and I felt my baby stir inside me. As I smoothed my hand over her, I wondered if she was as relieved as I was.

...

(I hope you weren't confused with that last part – I thought it would work if Steve was named after his dad, just like Clare is sort of named after Clara. It's okay if you skipped over it if you were bored.)

Hope you enjoyed this one (despite it being kind of fillerish)!

Last year, I wrote a Christmas chapter for this story and I've been writing what happens before that chapter this whole year and I'm gutted I didn't get to share that part of the story before Christmas this year :(

So...

I'm aiming for maybe another ten chapters (woop woop)! But I go back to uni in late January so after that time, updates will be sparse.

Be *brutally* honest with me, is the 'Clare's real momma' plot line good or bad? Is it a yay or a nay?

22. Cracks on the Ceiling

I'm so sorry for taking so long to update! I've decided to go with shorter chapters so I can hopefully update more.

I hope you like this short and sweet (but also not-so-sweet) chapter!

22: Cracks on the Ceiling

Friday 7th December 1984

Mist formed and fogged the windows inside Billy's car as we climbed into the back, and we smiled, still drunk with joy from our date. Our first *proper* date, one without sex afterward (I didn't count the other day as a date for some reason). He'd taken me to a movie, and this time, we stayed for the full duration. There had been no wandering hands or eyes full of pleading lust. It was just a simple, normal night for two teen kids without a care in the world.

"If only it could always be like this." I said as I snuggled under Billy's arm in the backseat as he idly drew patterns onto the fogged glass. The radio played lightly in the background, but nothing heavy played; the songs were soft enough to lull us into an even deeper contentment.

"Really?" He looked at me, nose wrinkled.

"Why're you giving me that face?" I said, sitting up in mock offense.

"I knew you where the type." He said in an equally mocking tone. One of his hands found my hip and traced patterns there, just as he had with the window.

"Type?"

"The type who'd like a boring date."

My jaw dropped in mock horror as I crossed my arms, amused.

"Admit it. It was boring. We watched a cheap romantic movie and ate

popcorn and drank coke and now we're parking – but the boring kind of parking where it's guaranteed we won't get to grope each other before I drive you home, kiss your cheek and say goodnight."

"But it's our first date." I said before I leant into his chest. "Kind of boring, yeah. I see your point. But I think it was cute."

He wrinkled his nose again.

"Dates are supposed to be cute! And I'm glad we didn't just go suck face somewhere. And I'm going to make a point *not* to make out with you because I know you, and I know that making out will encourage groping. So, no. No groping." I shook my finger at him.

He let out an exaggerated huff as his head flopped back onto the headrest.

"Despite how you're acting, I know you liked it too." I leant forward to kiss his neck, but he flinched back before I could.

"Don't kiss me there." He said, eyes wide.

"What, are you ticklish?" I asked as a smirk formed.

He didn't answer, and instead focused a pleading look on me. I sprung on him. With my legs either side of his waist and my hands on his chest, I dotted kisses along his throat. He let out breathy laughs as he tried and failed to push me off. His hands found my thighs and squeezed.

"Say you... liked our... boring... date." I said between the peppered kisses.

"No." He gasped.

I kiss him again, and he jumped, bucking me. "Say it!"

"Okay, fine! I-enjoyed-our-boring-date!"

"Huh?" Another kiss. "Didn't hear."

"I enjoyed the date! The *boring* date." He said, breathing heavily.

I pulled away and leant against the back of the front seat, my legs still parted over his. I watched, elated, as his chest heaved. His cheeks and a stripe across the bridge of his nose was rosy like he'd been powdered with strawberry frosting.

"Jesus." He sighed as his body sagged into the chair.

"Sorry." I said, impish.

He simply smirked and shook his head. "Once I recover, I'm getting you back."

"Oh, are you?"

"Mmhmm." He nodded as a roguish and playfully vengeful look heated his eyes.

"Well, before you do that... I have a question." I placed my hands on his.

"What?"

"Steve was telling me yesterday that there's this thing on Saturday – well, tomorrow. And I'm invited and I was wondering if you'd want to join?"

"Is this like a party or something? How come I didn't hear about it in school?" He asked.

"Um, it's a party, yeah. But it's not, uh, not thrown by anyone at school."

"By who then? College kid?" His brow puckered.

"Uh, I think I've been really terrible at explaining this. Let me start again; it's a little Christmas get-together at the Wheeler's house."

"Wheeler's house?" He said, eyes narrowed. "Since when does Nancy Wheeler throw parties?"

"Her mom's throwing it."

"Her mom?" His eyes bulged as the strawberry frosting on his face darkened to a endearing shade of raspberry.

"Yeah."

"So, her mom's gonna let a bunch of underaged kids get drunk under her roof."

"No. She'd never. Look, it's not a teen party, it's an adult party with soft drinks and Christmas presents and finger food."

His eyes widened with sudden understanding before narrowing in disgusted. "I'm not going."

"But Steve and Mrs Byers and Jonathan and Nancy and all of the kids are going to be there, and I thought you wanted to make things right, or at least apologise to everyone."

His hands turned to fists beneath mine as he looked away to the patterns he'd drawn. They dripped down like rain, and like the face I'd drawn on the window before Billy's sink decided to puke black slime.

"They all hate me." He said, his voice pulling me back to the car and the warmth of his lap.

"But I- I don't." I said, before I bit at my lip.

The soft song that had been playing from the radio came to an end and a newscaster's voice shattered our solitude.

"...having a great time tuning in but remember, kids, be safe out there. We've just heard of another girl going missing. This time it was down by Sugar Creek and after all that was revealed about Barbara Holland's disappearance last year, we wanted to remind..."

"Sugar Creek? That's not far from here." I muttered more to myself than to Billy as I thought of Jude. How would she react if she heard this? She knew all too well the pain of her sister going missing, and if I were in her position, I'd hate for someone to go through that.

My eyes found the dripping patterns that cried down the glass and

my mind once again drifted to the sink.

I spoke; "It did happen y'know. What I saw in your sink was real."

Billy nodded with a worried face, and I couldn't figure out whether he believed me or not. I climbed off his lap and onto the neighbouring seat before I rested my head on the window, desperate to soothe the headache which had blossomed across my forehead. The memories of talons tearing into my scalp and the whispering voice beckoning me to *drink* burnt through my mind.

Why couldn't life be as sweet and as boring as our first date?

...

Billy

After I dropped Clare off and drove home, I decided it wasn't that I didn't believe her about the sink, it was that I hadn't wanted to. And I know if was unfair on Clare, but I didn't want another thing at home to keep me from falling asleep as easy as I had as a child. Every creak or bump or clunk in or outside of the house at night since finding out Hawkins secrets had only served to create a deeper fear in my stomach – Neil wasn't the only thing that could hurt me anymore. But whatever had attacked Clare wanted her, and her alone it seemed. It hadn't attacked us both when it had the perfect opportunity. It wanted her. And Clare gone... or missing like the girl from Sugar Creek... or dead like Holland... that scared me more than Neil ever had.

Pussy, the voice inside me sniggered.

I rolled my eyes.

I guess I was a pussy. But if caring about someone made me a pussy, then so be it.

I pulled up to the house and parked next to Neil's car. He was home. The lights in the front room glowed through the lace curtains, beaming onto the front lawn and making the grass seem as thick as dead fingers jutting from the ground, desperate to escape their graves. I huffed as I got out, locked the door and walked over to the

house. My breath fogged out from my mouth in arabesque swirls and vanished into the air just like the girl from the news report. I walked into the house and was enveloped by the darkened hallway, the only light being that which bled in from the front room's doorway. I toed my shoes off and quickly, but most importantly, *quietly*, padded past the doorway.

As I passed, I hesitantly glanced into the room. No one was there. The seats were empty. The TV off. The gym equipment vacant. Neil's regular spot on the puke green couch was deserted. I gathered Susan must be working late, but Neil was here, somewhere. His car was parked out there and I doubted that he suddenly started going on lonesome walks around Hawkins. He was in the house. And I didn't want to find out where.

I carried on walking. I went passed Max's room and as per usual, no noise came from behind the door which read 'No Boys Allowed' in blocky red writing. I carried on, eventually passing Neil's room which was also silent. Then I came to where the hallway bent, and off this bend there was the bathroom and then at the end of the hall was my room.

I stopped there. The bathroom door was open, wide and propped by a tool box. Light leaked out in a harsh rectangle and the most acute corner seemed to point at me, beckon me to come forth, or perhaps it wanted to give me a telling off.

Pussy.

I padded further toward the door in a desperate attempt to quell the voice and its mocking. Quickly. Quietly. Then I would be back in my room.

"Is that you?" His voice called, cold.

My eyes closed involuntarily as the air from my lungs fled as silently as a hummingbird's wings. "It's me."

"Come here."

There was no question of not going. I dragged my feet the final steps

to the gallows, and once there I observed the bathroom while leaning against the door; the faucet no longer belched water and was wrapped in a murky towel which was once white; other damp towels lay strewed across the floor like dead bodies; and Neil was knelt on the floor before the sink not 3ft away with ice-eyes on mine. Even though my height was greater than his at that moment I still knew very much that he was the one with all the authority, and it was made clear with his next words.

"Pass me the wrench." He said, voice quiet yet still as firm as his hands. It wasn't 'please pass me the wrench' or even 'can you pass me the wrench'. It was a demand. And I, the loyal dog, had to obey – *or else*.

My eyes trailed down to the tool box at the foot of the door, then back at him. His eyes still lay on me, steady and impassive. I cleared my throat as I knelt and met an array of mettle, all grey and black apart from the occasional primary color. I picked out the wrench, which was a dirty grey and covered in grease, and showed it to him. Neil said nothing. I held it out for him to take.

"Wrong type." He said.

"Which type do you want then?"

"The red one."

I looked over the toolbox again and after sifting through the metal as if it were a tub full of Lego, I finally found it. I pulled it out and held it to him.

He didn't take it.

I asked; "Is this the right-"

"I worry about you." He interrupted as he stood. "You've got to grow up, Billy. You barely do any of the housework anymore, and your grades have dropped. For the Lord's sake, you should be fixing this sink. You go out running around with the scum of the earth, and I can't help but worry."

"Dad-"

In a sudden swoop Neil's hand spatted painfully against my wrist and I had to grip the wrench firmer so it wouldn't fall. There would be a lemony bruise blossoming tomorrow in the shape of Neil's fingers. I planted my feet in case Neil wanted to do anything more.

"Sir..." I started, not sure of what my next words would be. I cleared my throat of slate before I carried on, huskily, "I – uh..."

"Speak up."

"Th-the other day – when Clare said she'd tell the Chief..." I said and his grip somehow got tighter making my heart thunder against my ribs.

"Is that what's made you so pale?" He smiled one of those rare mocking smiles. Watching that smile was like watching a sand storm travel rapidly your way. "When that girl said what she said, I wondered what in Sam Hill is she thinking? I know she won't tell anyone. She knows that too. But *if* she did, what could anyone do about it? Nothing. You're mine. Mine to worry about. Mine to take care of."

My wrist shook under his grip. There was concern on his face but it was predatory, and it was more frightening than comforting. I wished whatever Clare's brain had cooked up was real – and I still wasn't sure if it was – and I wished that it would belch from the pipes and swallow Neil whole. For once I didn't hate the voice's words; **Let it fucking get him. Good fucking riddance.**

"You've got to grow up." Neil said as his hand slid in an oddly gentle way along my skin to the wrench. He took it from my hand softly and I pictured him batting me over the head with it. "You can go now. I have to finish fixing your mess."

I did as he said. I went to my room, closed the door, and undressed. I climbed into bed, my heart still aching with black fear as I covered myself with the sheets which no longer smelled of Clare. Scared to close my eyes under the grey darkness of my room, I settled on counting the number of cracks on the ceiling until I fell into a fitful and thin sleep.

...

Poor Billy :(

Hope u liked this one!

Sorry for any mistakes.

Do you prefer shorter chapters?

Thank you for getting this far into the story x

23. Dyspepsia

Its nearly 2 am beech...

The second half of this chapter was the chapter I wrote more than a year ago (one of the first things I ever wrote for this story) and I'm so glad it's finally been posted. The first half, on the other hand, was written yesterday. So, if there's a difference in quality then that's probably why. I've realised that over the past year, my writing has improved so much. I mean, I'm not Charles Dickens or anyone but I'm better than I was, and I honestly have to thank you guys. Let's be real, if no one had read this then chances are I probably wouldn't have felt motivated to continue. Therefore, I'd still suck ass at writing. So, thanks for reading!

Saturday 8th December 1984

Billy

I sometimes remember a piece of advice given to me by my mother, one that I guess she'd neglected to give Neil. She told me not to fight anyone unless it was necessary, and after her passing I'd tried not to, but I was a fuck up – so what did she expect? I felt less and less guilty the more I fought. Fighting Steve, Tommy, boys back in Cali; that was nothing. They were nothing to me. I wondered if that was why Neil found it so easy to hit me; because, to him, I was nothing.

My bedroom mirror reflected a distorted version of the person I used to be. Normally, my skin was sun kissed and healthy, my hair was coifed and sprayed into position, and my eyes glowed with a blue arrogance I assumed most people only showed when by themselves.

It had all been stripped away by a string of actions.

My own pale and bloodied skin, flat hair, and red eyes stared back at me in loathing.

It was my fault; what had happened at the Wheeler's was *my* fault. I

should've taken my mother's advice. What happened at the Wheeler's? I wasn't sure. I remember the events leading up to the incident and the mist of anger and hate that fogged my eyes with red. I met my eyes in the mirror as I went over what had happened today.

Earlier, I'd driven Max to the Wheeler's where I'd seen Harrington's car parked nearby and I knew Clare was in there with all her friends and fellow freaks and I was alone. Max had left my car and skipped over to the door and I watched with a frown as her ginger hair swayed happily whilst she entered the Wheeler's home.

Snow seemed to bat across my windscreen as I drove back to Neil's house where a hot meal made by Susan was probably waiting. Once back, I toed my boots off and wandered into the dining room, hackles up in case Neil was waiting. He wasn't. I stopped in the doorway, looking over the white walls and chairs and cabinets and the new red cotton tablecloth that Susan bought because she thought it would liven up the place. *This house is so bland, she'd said, so white, too white! Boring. Nothing like our house in California.* I wondered how long until Max stained it by eating like a pig. My meal was set out on that red tablecloth, still steaming. *Thank you, Susan.* I sat at the table and ate. Steam rose from the gravy and I didn't care if I burnt my tongue. Upon straining my ears, I could hear the TV in the room as a laugh track sounded off. They were probably in there, sat on the puke green couch watching TV as the meal they had eaten without me digested in their middle-aged stomachs.

When I finished, I washed the plate and put it away before exiting the kitchen. Biting the insides of my cheeks and holding my breath seemed to help with the three steps passed the archway that led into the living room – and every time I made the three step journey with Neil only feet away on that puke green couch, time seemed to slow, as if knowing that the more time I spent here, the more chance that I would feel *scared*. The TV laughed at me as I passed. My eyes flickered to red hair and then down to green eyes in that brief three step journey – a normal step-mom would've said *hi* or asked if I dropped Max over the Wheelers or would've said something, but Susan knew better now than to point out that I was back. And it was likely Neil already knew and just didn't want to bother wasting anymore breath on his fuck up son.

After the three steps were over, I breathed out silently and steadily. All of my breath fled until there was nothing left and my lungs burnt for more. I breathed in. Then out. And then I treaded along the dim hallway. My eyes caught onto slither of green light which bled out from the ajar bathroom door. I inched forward to peak through the cracked door. The ceramic room was infected by green light as if the sun itself was sick. The deep-set square window was open, and the bitter wind tugged at the blinds. A chill scuttled down my spine - someone just walked over my grave.

I pushed the door open softly so that I could go and close the window, but the door seemed to open as slow as frost settling over glass, groaning as it did so. I cringed at the noise and caught its movement with my hand. The groan stopped. My eyes caught the red wrench on the sink. And then where the toolbox lay at the foot of the bathtub. That's odd. Neil fixed the sink. Why are they still out?

Above the toolbox came a rustle – probably because of the breeze. I glared the at the window. And out of the corner of my eye... there was something... standing. I couldn't bring myself to look at it fully. From the corner of my view I could see it was black. As black as the bottom of a well. For a few seconds my heart seemed to fill my ears with nothing but the sound of blood pumping and pumping through my body. I couldn't blink. I couldn't move. My eyes began to water. But I had to know what it was. Clare couldn't have seen a black creature in here. There was no way. And what I was seeing... it was probably just a shadow – maybe even my shadow... but there wasn't any light behind me...

C'mon, don't be a pussy. Fucking look. LOOK.

I looked. It stood behind the shower curtain. Dark and still and watching. I couldn't see its eyes, but I knew it must be watching me. I let go of the door. It groaned before knocking into the wall. I didn't take my eyes off that thing. There was something about the way it held itself which caused my stomach to churn with a sinister familiarity.

The shadowed figure was small. Only a few feet tall. It seemed to vibrate with rage. Or with pain?

A sharp gust blew in. My eyes flickered to the blinds rattling violently against the glass, then I looked back to the shower. The figure had vanished. I ran forward. Yanked the shower curtain back. There was nothing. I looked down. Slimy black tentacles of sludge writhed in the tub, each one trying to slither away down the sink hole.

I fell back onto the floor. I crawled backward. The wall hit my back.

Sharp pants came out.

My throat was raw.

What is going on? A foggy voice came from behind.

I didn't answer.

For Pete's sake, you knocked the tools everywhere.

My wide eyes glanced to the tools strewn across the bathroom floor like flowers ripped from the ground and tossed around with no regard for their dying beauty. I hadn't even noticed knocking into the toolbox.

I focused my gaze back onto the tub.

Why're you so pale, boy? He knelt to my level, ***see a spider?*** He chuckled. ***Or maybe a ghost?*** He laughed. It was a brassy, hard laugh. It rumbled from his gut and beat into my ears. My head throbbed.

"I saw—" I swallowed – my throat burned because there was no spit. None at all.

"Well," Neil stood, "explain. Now."

"You're right... there was a... a big spider and I th-th-thought it was gonna..."

Neil shook his head as he walked over to the tub.

The warning to stay back almost shot out of my mouth, but I stopped. I pictured a hundred wet tentacles and dragging Neil through the sink

hole as easy as if he were made of playdough. Yesterday, I'd wanted Clare's make-believe sludge to swallow him whole but knowing that it was real – it was *fucking real* – I wasn't sure anymore. Would I laugh if that happened? Maybe if that familiar mist of red rage covered my vision, then yes, *hell yes*, I would laugh. I would revel in the sight of his guts and flesh and stupid fucking moustache being forced down the sink hole by those black snakes in a putrid mess of bubbled blood.

But if it happened now? When my vision was clear? When the saint necklace hung heavy around my neck? I don't think I wanted it to kill him. I don't think I wanted Neil to die. And that really confused me.

He peered into the tub, bending over and placing his hands on the sides. He tutted as he turned back to me.

"Didn't see anything." He said. "You're safe."

No, I wasn't. And the malice in Neil's eyes made that very clear.

"Clean this mess up." He said, and I gathered he meant that I had more than the floor to clean.

He walked away with heavy steps. I wrapped my arms around my shoulders and blinked away the moisture. I packed the tools into the box and left them under the sink.

I was never using that fucking bathroom ever again.

At 7:40PM I drove to the Wheeler's to pick Max up. I was early and so I sat in my car, smoking, and rubbing at my wrist. The new bruise was a peachy yellow just as I had predicted. *Thank you, Neil.*

Snow was tumbling down in soft waves through the navy sky, adding another thick layer to the already puffed surface. It placed itself on top of my car, lulling me. My head dropped back, and my eyes grew heavy.

Someone knocked on the window. That thing from the bathroom flashed before my eyes. I jumped, dropped my cig onto my lap. Someone giggled. I looked out – thinking that the black snake monster *thing* couldn't have just *giggled* – and I saw Clare, smiling as

sweetly as lemony summer sunlight. My eyebrows arched as I slumped back in the chair. She giggled once again, bright and twinkling. I grabbed my cig and got out of the car while closing the door and flicking the cig away. It hissed when it met the snow.

"I made you jump." She laughed softly.

"I forgot you'd be here." I lied, ignoring the cold of the car as I leant onto it sideways.

Her smile dropped. "Sure you did. Well, here I am." She said, raising a shoulder and smirking as she played with something in her coat pocket. "Lucky you."

"Mmm..." My tongue flicked out to drag along my bottom lip. "Lucky me."

"Close your eyes." A smile grew on her face as she stepped forward.

"What?" I said, nose wrinkling.

She came closer and mirrored my position so that both our sides leant against the Camaro. I moved my right arm on top of the car next to her head, and my fingertips twirled the very ends of her hair, hopefully sending light tingles down her spine. My other hand sought warmth and so travelled through her unzipped coat to her waist, where my fingers played with the fabric of her t-shirt, pulling it up slightly so I could trace along her ribs.

"Close your eyes." She whispered, urging me, the cold of her breath coming out like smoke from one of my cigarettes.

"Alright, Princess." I conceded, closing my eyes. I blindly settled both my hands on her waist, needing to steal the warmth.

Her coat rustled and I felt her body move as she brought an arm above our heads.

"Open them." She said.

My eyes opened, then widened a little as they trailed up her arm. Then I saw it clutched in her petite hand: mistletoe. I laughed.

"What?" She asked, lightly smacking my shoulder with her free hand as the other one lowered the mistletoe.

"If you wanted to kiss me, all you had to do was ask." I said, chuckling. "Or, y'know, just kiss me. It's not like we're new at this."

"I don't think I will 'just' kiss you if you're going to laugh at me." She pouted. The snow crunched under her feet as she took a step back from me.

I narrowed my eyes as I stole the mistletoe from her and wrapped my right arm around her waist, yanking her body flush against mine. With our chests pressed together, I could feel her soft breasts against my chest. My eyes sought hers as I wondered if she could feel my heart beating. I held the plastic plant above us, my left eyebrow rising as I silent way of asking *how about now?*

It was her turn to laugh and a twinkling sound came from her pink lips, making my chest ache with something not unlike affection, but stronger. I looked to her full lips, then back to her eyes. She inched forward, almost hesitant. Our noses flirted with each other's. Our breathes mixed. Ever so slowly, so delicately, our lips met. We didn't move at first. We were frozen; her lips pressed to mine and mine to hers. My chest filled with an unknown feeling, one that felt like sunlight streaming into my heart and pumping into each of my arteries and veins until my fingers and toes tingled.

She moved first, covering my mouth with a hungry kiss. She devoured my lips, sucking and tonguing them, massaging my mouth with soft licks and caresses from her hot wet mouth. I replied with equal fervor. She whimpered, and I groaned. My jeans tightened. My tongue was demanding, dominant as it played and stroked hers. Her hands held onto my shoulders, and the pressure of her fingers spurred me on. My arm circled her waist, the other hand reached down to grope her bum.

My head was light as we parted for air, but I carried on with rough kisses down her neck before I pulled her mouth back to mine, needing more of the taste of her tongue. She always made the world fall away.

We were wrapped up together, still kissing when suddenly, we weren't. A hand yanked me away. My first thought was; it's Neil, my second; it's that thing from the bathroom and it's come for Clare and me.

Caught off guard, I was thrown to the ground. A figure straddled me before I could do anything to block them.

I couldn't stop them from punching my mouth.

"Steve! No!"

Blood. I could smell it. Despite the throbbing of my teeth and lips, I laughed, crazed from the blood beating through my brain.

"Stay away..." Steve shouted, his fists balled up, hitting home again.
"...from her!"

My head swung to the side as his fist came down again. The snow crunched.

Clare appeared and tried to pull Steve off. Forcefully, he pushed her away. She thumped into the side of car.

Steve froze and watched as Clare rubbed her hip, eyes wide and wet. She was shaking.

My hands twitched before I balled them into fists.

Clare

"Did I hurt you?" Steve said as he pulled himself and came to my side.

"I'm fine!" I said.

Behind him, Billy was slowly getting up, laughing his crazed laugh as he got to his feet. I could feel tears start to gather and I desperately didn't want them to fall right now.

Billy came forward, snow crackling under his boots.

"Billy," I started.

Billy struck Steve. A loud crack echoed in the air as Steve went stumbling sideways into the Camaro. Billy wiped blood from his mouth, before walking forward, eyes homed in on Steve.

"Couldn't stay away." Billy said with a dark laugh. "Could you, Harrington?"

I moved quickly, my goal to get between them. I held my hands up to Billy, trying to pull at his shirt or his jacket or his hands – anything I could to slow him down – but he kept walking to Steve. He shrugged my hands off easily, like they were as light as feathers, before he sent one firm punch onto Steve's face.

Billy held up Steve by his collar before saying; "No one. Tells me what to do." He murmured before throwing Steve against his car. He stomped forward, sending an upward strike to Steve's stomach. I was tugged at his jacket and tried to pull him off. But he was too strong. I was reminded of the fight at the Byers' house. He was uncontrollable, then and now. Only this time, there was no syringe to stop him.

Tears fell as I turned and ran through the snow back to the Wheeler's. The cold air hit my lungs and filled them with ice as I ran. Once at the front door, I burst in, letting it slam into the wall. Dustin was stood nearby and looked up, concerned.

"You good? Where's Steve?" He said, oblivious to what was going on out there.

"Where's Hopper?" I said, sniffing. "Hopper! Hopper!" I called into the house, running to the living room. On the way there, Joyce came in front of me, grabbing my shoulders.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" She smoothed back my hair.

"They're fighting! Please! I-I can't get them to stop!"

Hopper appeared then, expression laced with seriousness. This was his business face, his cop face.

"Please stop them!" I cried. "They're out by his car."

"Who?" He said, voice firm with eyes locked on mine.

"Steve and Billy."

"Damn kids." He cursed as he jogged out of the room. I followed closely behind him, the pound of my heart rate matching my feet hitting the ground.

Once outside, I saw that they had moved around a bit. Currently, Steve, who must have had the upper hand for a moment, was straddling Billy on the ground, punching him. Then they were rolled over by the stronger of the two; Billy, who then got on top and pounded into Steve's face.

Hopper dragged Billy off Steve mid-blow, yanking him up and around with his grip on Billy's jacket. He then switched his grasp to the collar of his shirt, before pushing him away from us.

It was then I realized that other people had followed us out. Nancy, Dustin and Joyce were fussing over Steve, trying to help him up. Jonathan stood by, acting as a barrier keeping Max, Lucas and Will away. Mrs. Wheeler was stood in the doorway, her hand covering her mouth. Mike and Eleven were stood by her, their figures black silhouettes against the yellow light coming from the house. They held hands.

"Get out of here." Hopper said jabbing his pointer finger at Billy's chest.

Billy didn't move. He just looked down his nose at Hopper, catching his breath before his tongue swiped over his lip and dragged blood back into his mouth.

"GO! Before I arrest you." Hopper said, each word precise.

"Billy," I said. His eyes caught mine, and he saw the tears still wet on my face, as wet as the blood on his. His forehead creased. "Just go." I whispered. His eyes flickered with blue pain, but only for a moment. His face relaxed into a mask of cocky nonchalance before he huffed a small breathy laugh and shook his head. He turned to his car, got in, slammed the door, and as the engine roared, he sped away making a rush of bitter air hit into me.

As the others tended to Steve, I stared at the Camaro which grew smaller and smaller. Within a few seconds it had disappeared around the corner. My throat trembled as tears choked me.

Joyce came to wrap her arms around me, and as she wiped tears off with her thumbs, she said something to Hopper over my head, something about Max. Probably about who was going to take her home now.

I sniffed. The Christmas party was ruined.

On the dirtied snow in front of me lay the crumpled mistletoe; some of its leaves had ripped along with the red berries which were now pressed into the snow next to Billy and Steve's blood.

I'd love to hear your opinion on this chapter or any predictions for their future :)

24. Steve is Actually Very Smart

Hey guys!

Sorry I haven't posted in so long. I've literally been sat on this chapter for about a month and only yesterday decided to edit it. I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 24: Steve is Actually Very Smart

Waking with a sudden indrawn gasp, I sat upright in bed, eyes blinking rapidly as I tried to make sense of the darkness, hands clasped to my throat. My room was swathed in shadow, the only noise the tick-tick-tick of the clock. A haze of dark blue midnight light had curled into my room like smoke whilst I was sleeping. A cramp rocked in my stomach. I pulled the sheets away from my body. There was no blood. Thank God. Yet, pain continued crawling through my stomach.

"Fuck." I cursed as I pressed my hand to my side, hoping against hope to relieve the pain by adding pressure to it. It had the opposite effect. It seemed like fingernails clawed at my insides. "Shit."

You okay? A gravelled voice asked. Billy?

My head span rapidly in the direction of the sound. It was – as I had suspected – Billy, who sat next to me in bed, half covered by sheets up to his waist which hid his nakedness. His skin was shadowed just as the rest of the room was but there was just enough light to see that he was – oddly – flawless. There were no bruises. *None*. His eyes caught the moonlight as he shifted in the bed and moved over to me. His eyes were black. I froze. They were fully black; no white, and none of his ocean blue which I had become so familiar with was there.

My shoulders stiffed as his hand came to rest on mine.

He smiled.

I got you some water. His other hand produced a plastic cup filled with 'water'. ***It'll help with the pain.*** He held it out to me.

"Did you do this?"

Don't be stupid, Clare.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, hoping to distract him and prolong the event of him forcing me to drink it.

I'm here for you. I promised I'd never leave, remember. Now, drink.

The clock ticked by, each tick louder than the last.

I shook my head.

Why not? The darkness in his eyes leaked down his face. ***It'll help with the pain.*** His voice morphed – deepening and bubbling as if his insides were turning into liquid.

I pushed myself from the bed, tumbled onto the ground. My stomach cramped again. "Wake up!" I told myself. Scrunching my eyes shut, "Wake up!"

Choking, I woke. My skin was sweat slicked. I sat bolt upright, throat burning for air. I scratched at my neck. My stomach flipped. Oh God. I knew what was coming.

In the darkness of my room I ran for the bathroom. Flung the door open. And I collapsed next to the toilet as my throat clogged up with vomit. It sloshed into the toilet water, one hot and putrid tendril at a time. And then, finally, it was over. I flushed. And with eyes wet, stomach acid burning my throat and my mouth tasting like shit, I sat between the toilet and the bathtub and rested my head on my knees.

Across from where I sat stood the door which I had flung open on my way here. Now, it had almost closed; there was an opening; a crack that was only about five centimetres wide. No pink light streamed in from the room as it should have. The bulb must've popped in my sleep; I was sure as hell I had left it on. The only time I had managed to sleep with it off was when Billy had slept over – which was obviously never happening again.

Now or never, I guess. With a furrowed brow and fragile courage, I stood and made my way into the darkness of my room. My eyes searched for that thing. I couldn't see it. I trod over to my nightstand, reached blindly to the lamp and flicked the switch. No light came. I flicked it again. Nothing. Flick. Nothing.

I stared into the darkness that seemed so alive, wondering if my eyes were on *that thing* or not. But it was too dark to tell. Wet tracks ran down my cheeks. I wiped them away. I was so fucking tired of this shit.

A bird tweeted from outside my window. I knew this was stupid, but that bird added to my depleted courage. Some part of me willed that bird to be Hannah's reincarnation watching me with delicate eyes. It tweeted again, as if to say *yep, you can do it – go turn the big light on.*

After taking a breath, I ran to the light switch by my door. I flicked it on, and light filled my room. I sighed and my whole body sagged with relief. There was nothing here. The bird tweeted again. *Of course, there was nothing in your room, idiot. I'm not even Hannah, I'm just some bird and you're imagining my tweets are her words.*

I slumped against the door. I wanted to curl up and cry, but I was too scared to take my eyes off my room. Tears slid down and tickled my neck just as softly as Billy's lips. Harshly, I wiped them away.

...

Sometime after that, I had brushed my teeth and then tip-toed through the moonlit hallway to Steve's room with my pillow hugged firm to my chest. We hadn't slept in the same bed since we were 10 and 9 – I knew I couldn't sleep alone after that nightmare. I felt like a child as I cautiously opened his door and allowed light to spill into his room. I felt even more like a child when fresh tears started to leak down my cheeks and I couldn't help but clutch my pillow tighter like a teddy I had long ago stopped using because, *yes, mom, I'm teenager now.*

For a second, I was caught off guard. His room – thankfully – *wasn't* pitch black like I had expected. His desk lamp was on, gifting the room with a soft golden glow. It wasn't bright, but it was enough to

immediately calm me.

I toed to the bed, dodging papers and books and dirty clothes strewn about the floor, and eyed the Steve sized lump under his green sheets. His face, pointed away from the light, was shaded in grey but I could still see *them*; the cuts, the bruises, the dried blood.

My stomach swirled with disgust. And guilt. I should never have gotten mixed up with Billy. With *Hargrove*. I couldn't change someone like that, someone who had been raised with violence and hate. A therapist could try, but I was no therapist. I tried to imagine if my therapist – Doctor Holmes with all his war stories – would be capable, but I shook that thought away. Mixing my life at the hospital with my life now would only serve in making my temples throb – well, throb harder than they already were.

Steve didn't stir as I walked around to the other side of the bed, lifted the sheets and climbed in. I let my eyes close as I focused on my breathing.

One breath in, then out...

Two breaths...

Three...

...

"Hey, wake up." Something poked my cheek. I wacked it away and grumbled before my left eye opened. At first, I wasn't sure where I was. The room was too cream colored, and the ceiling somehow too high...

"Some doctor called." A voice said. Steve. He sounded... frustrated? Angry?

Both my eyes opened, and I realised I was in his bedroom.

He spoke, waving his hands, "a gynaecoh- gynag – a gynehcolol-"

"A gynaecologist?" I asked, voice gruff. Then it all came back to me, crashing against my head like a fat egg full of memories. The doctor I

saw – and it felt like I had seen the stuffy old guy years ago – had suggested I go to a gynaecologist. He'd set up an appointment for me that day, and I'd completely spaced.

"Yeah, *that*. And even though I can't say that word, doesn't mean I don't know what it is!" Steve said, picking up an icepack from his desk and coming to stand next to the bed again. "A gynaecolitch is a lady doctor," he held the ice pack to his face whilst the other hand pointed at me, "who deals with lady stuff. Mainly pregnancy! Right? I think. I don't know!" He said, trying to answer himself. "But what I do know is that I sure as hell am not having a niece or nephew whose father did this," he pointed at his face, "twice. Yeah, remember that? He's beaten the crap out of me twice in the span of- of – what – two months!"

"You did punch him *first* last night."

"Clare!"

"What? I'm not defending him but you're not completely innocent either."

"Gee thanks! Best sister of the year goes to..." he scoffed, "just tell me you're not... don't tell me you think you're..." he eyed my stomach.

"No!" I sat up, cheeks hot.

"*If* he's knocked you up, I fucking swear to God-"

"He hasn't." I said, firm.

"Then why is a gynaecolliyogist calling to confirm your appointment?"

I scoffed. "I mean, it's kind of embarrassing."

"More embarrassing than my own flesh and blood macking with Hargrove? I think it's fair to say I win when it comes to how embarrassed we both feel."

"I've been bleeding profusely from my lady parts when I'm not supposed to."

He paled as his eyes darted away from mine, "okay, maybe you win then."

I may as well tell him everything. He'd ask eventually why I had come to sleep in his bed last night and I... I didn't want to lie anymore.

"And..." I breathed in, eyeing the breeze playing with his blinds, the sound of them rustling bringing me back to his room and the conversation that I should have had with him when the dreams got really bad. "I've been having nightmares again. And I think I'm seeing things."

"You're – what?" He sat down beside me, his eyes never leaving mine.

"It's not like the time before. I don't see Hannah. I think that maybe the things I'm seeing... are *real*."

"What kind of things?"

"I was over at the Hargrove's house," I began, sensing Steve's hackles raise. "and there was this thing – a creature, I guess, in their bathroom."

"A demigorgan?"

"You could say the thing I saw was like a cousin of a demigorgan. It was black and slimy. Like a snake. It wanted me to drink something. I don't know what. And then it disappeared back into the sink. Billy thought I'd gone crazy." I played with the edge of my pj top. "Crazy Clare."

Steve's arm came around my back and his hand smoothed back and forth across my shoulder. "You're not crazy." He said, voice steady. I wished I could believe him.

"Then why is it happening again? It felt so real."

"You just have to keep telling yourself that Eleven closed the gate."

"But what if something went wrong?" I asked, eyes locking onto his. "What if she didn't close it all the way? Or what if something got

stuck on this side?"

"It didn't." He shook his head.

"But you don't know that."

"No, I don't. But I have to convince myself of that every day. Or how else am I gonna sleep? ...I used to have little panics in here at night when the pool lights were left on and they'd shine through my blinds. Barbara. She'd cross my mind. You know, Nancy blames herself for that. She blames me too..."

"I blame myself for Hannah." I said. I ducked my head away from him.

"It wasn't your fault..." He whispered. "I think that... we all blame ourselves for things we think we could've stopped. But in reality, there's nothing we could've done to stop those things from happening. They just happen. It's not your fault Hannah died. And Barbara didn't die because of me. But – like you – I can't help feeling guilty sometimes."

"You're a lot smarter than people say you are."

"Thanks." He smiled, eyes shining with unshed tears. "Hey! What do people say about me?"

"Uh, I need to brush my teeth." I said as I stood from the bed and walked over to his door, swiftly exiting.

"Hey!" I heard him call. "What do people say?"

...

Hopper

Hopper's hands both lay across his stomach cradling an empty beer can. He slouched in the La-Z-Boy in front of the TV, the lull of a warm winter's evening settling into his frame. His eyes drifted closed and he wondered when the last time he'd had a nice nap was. Between work and dealing with the US government and looking after Jane and keeping her and Mike *separate*, naps had been few and far

between. He took in a breath and felt his whole frame sag deeper into the chair as his conscious drifted...

The phone rang.

Fucking Christ, Hop thought. Fucking Jesus shit.

He stumbled up from the chair, threw the beer can into the almost full trashcan – silently thanking God when it went in but then cursing when it rebounded from the trashcan and landed on the floor with a clack – before finally making it to the phone. Every ring up to that point had caused his blood pressure to spike further and further.

He picked up the phone and huffed at it, "What?"

"Chief Hopper?" A young voice asked. He swore if this was one of those damn kids...

"Who is this?" Hop asked.

"Steve. Uh, Harrington?" He said. Hopper scowled. This was the kid from the fight outside the Wheeler's last night – Hop wondered how it was possible that he'd gotten into *more* trouble in such a short amount of time.

"Jee-sus, kid. Has something else happened with that Hargrove boy? That why you're calling?"

"No."

"Then what's the problem?" Hop asked, leaning his head against the wall.

"It's my sister. Clare. She doesn't know I'm calling you. She, uh, she thinks something..."

"Spit it out, kid." He asked, not caring if he sounded at all impatient.

"She thinks something got stuck on this side."

At this, Hop straightened. "Something?"

"Something from the Upside Down."

Hopper sensed he wouldn't be getting any more naps in, not for a long time.

...

I haven't finished watching ST3 yet and I'm kind of excited with where it's going. I'm on ep4. How about you? No spoilers though plz :)

Thanks for reading!

Question: Do you prefer reading first or third person?

25. Russkey Toy

Thank you so much for all the reviews/favs/follows! It's so amazing!

The reason why this chapter and the last one were so late is because I'm officially a BTS stan and they take up all my free time now. I love them. (one of the ppl who followed this story was called something BTS related so I have to hi, I'm army too)

We're only four days away from the Snow Ball in S2!

...

25: Russkey Toy

Monday 10th December 1984

TO ASK 'MOM' AND 'DAD':

Is she dead?

What abt my real dad?

What exactly happened to her in the lab? LSD?

Why was I not one of the numbered girls (like 11)?

"Why are 'mom' and 'dad' in quote marks?" Sarah Harrington asked as she looked up from the list I'd written when I should've been paying attention to Ms Belle's lecture about different tenses in Spanish. Then, thankfully, the bell had rang. It was the end of the school day. I'd folded my list with care and placed it in the back pocket of my jeans before shoving my Spanish book into my backpack and shrugging out of the room.

I shoved my shit into my locker, slammed it shut and prayed I didn't run into Billy. I went to the toilet because I fucking swore I felt blood in my panties during class – but upon checking, the strawberry panties were clean – well, as clean as they could've been after wearing them all day.

Just as I was about to exit the school, a hand grasped onto my wrist. By this time the halls were empty. And Billy didn't think anyone would see if he dragged me into an unoccupied classroom.

"What do you want?" I asked, arms crossed as I sat on the teacher's desk.

"I wanted to apologise."

"Okay? So, you're sorry. Great. But my brother's face is still messed up."

"He punched first."

"I know." I said, shoulders tensed like a feral cat being threatened by some mutt. "But someone mature... wouldn't carry on fighting once they had the upper hand."

"But-"

"But what? Violence can be the answer sometimes, yes. But not always. Steve was wrong to punch you. You weren't wrong to punch back. But you were wrong to keep going. And I... think I was wrong."

"About what?"

About you, I wanted to say – but I couldn't. I was afraid saying that was like saying he wasn't good enough for me and I knew he'd take it that way, and so instead I said, "About us." I couldn't look him in the eye. I didn't want him to see how fucking angry I felt – angry at me and him and fucking Steve and Hannah and this whole fucked town. I didn't want to see if he looked sad nor did I want to see the alternative (him looking like he felt nothing). And so instead I focused on the word tree at the back of the classroom, its leaves stapled to the wall. "I don't know if... if we can ever come back from this. You know, when you beat up Tommy H in gym class? I told you afterwards that you weren't you. I realise now that it was. It's not that you become a different person when you fight people – that person, the person who reminds me of your father, is always there. Hidden underneath everything that makes up you. The you that I care so deeply about. And I want you. I want you so much. But above

everything I want you to change. But I don't know if I can ask you to do that..." *or if you even can.*

"So, I remind you of my father, huh?" He asked, voice thick. "You've only met him twice and I guess you're such a fucking expert on him already."

"I didn't say that." I said, eyes still not meeting his. He hadn't listened to how much I wanted him. He only heard the bad. My hope for him and us pebbled in my throat before it dropped into my stomach like a stone thrown down a dark wishing well.

From my peripheral I saw his arms cross. "If you're not gonna accept my apology-

"I do accept it."

His head tilted back. "Then why are you being such a prissy little-

"Clare?" Our heads swung to find the owner of the voice. Jude stood in the doorway with an apple in one hand and her books in the other. She was wearing a cheerleader uniform – I didn't miss the breeze offered by the blue and white miniskirts. Her glossy autumn hair was up in a high pony allowing us to see her swan-like neck hollow out in places as she swallowed a deep breath when both mine and Billy's eyes settled on her. I looked at Billy and the clenching of his jaw, the tensing of his hands, the twitching of his fingers, and I couldn't help but see his fingers wrapped around Judy's swan-neck, choking the youth from her.

Judy spoke, smashing the image from my mind like throwing a crowbar at a TV set. "Me and the girls just finished gym class when I saw you two come in here." Her tongue poked the inside of her cheek, as her eyes darted from Billy to me. "Everything okay?"

"It's just great, Ringwald." Billy's false smirk was given away by his malicious eyes before he slinked away past Jude. She shrank back from him so that he didn't touch her as he went through the doorway. Judy's wide eyes met the floor as we both listened to his heavy footsteps in the empty hall. They faded away. Then we heard nothing.

"Ringwald? So original of him, huh?" She tried to smile. "I used to call Barb 'Molly Ringwald' when she annoyed me."

I didn't reply. I was embarrassed of Billy's behaviour and embarrassed of myself – because I was still very much on the teetering edge of being *too fond* of him, and *too fond* was only a few steps away from the *L word*. And I hated myself in that moment for liking someone so–so *fucked*.

"I saw him drag you in here and I panicked." She said, rushed, as she came forward and grasped onto my forearms. "I debated on going and telling Steve but... I didn't think I could find him in time and I didn't want to risk another fight, so, here I am. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks. I can't handle him anymore."

"He sucks."

I nodded.

Judy asked. "So, I'm not doing anything this evening. Wanna go sneak into the movies?"

"You know what? That sounds amazing. Steve can drive us!" I tried to plaster on a smile.

Jude's face lit up. Her and my brother... they made a better couple than Billy and I ever could.

After the movies, Steve drove me home and said he'd back later before driving off with a smiling Jude. I walked into the main foyer of the house and saw my 'parents' moving the boxes back into the basement. It was scheduled to be drained that day, but I knew once the blackened water was gone, the damp would still be there permeating the air and adding to the toxicity of the house.

"What're you doing?" I asked Sarah's back.

Sarah's hand flew to her chest as she spoke. As she spun around, her other hand came into view. She held a drink of wine, and as she moved the liquid sloshed around the in spherical glass like blood thinned by water. "Oh, Clare! You frightened me. You're back late."

She said, the hint of question leaking out.

"Went to the movies." I answered the non-question question.

"Steve went with you." Another non-question question. "I can't keep up with you kids." She flapped her hand in the air as her eyes rolled back into her head. I agreed. She'd never been one to keep up with kids, let alone do anything with them apart from make them wait in the salon as she got her roots touched up. But in my bedroom – before she knew that I'd found out about Clara – she'd seemed so regretful of how she'd treated us. How regretful could she really have been if she was drinking – again.

"Yeah, he's dropping his friend home." I said. The basement door opened and out came Steven Senior. "Basement drained?"

"Yep." Sarah popped the 'p'. "Your father hired that plumbing company- the one Steve called when it flooded. Terribly expensive, but..." She placed the martini on a wrinkled cardboard box. "...your father should find another job quite soon."

Steven's jaw tightened as if he'd stubbed his toe. "Of course, dear."

"Here's hoping!" Sarah slurred, raising her glass, and I again couldn't help but see blood in her glass.

I asked, "Do you need any help with the boxes?"

"Oh! Ha haaa. For a second there, I thought you were gonna offer to help out by getting a job! Haa. But yeah, the boxes." She slapped a box and dust puffed into the air in one great plume. She coughed and fanned it away, not minding the odd spill of her wine onto her cream carpet – which would no doubt stain. Steven just looked on, silent and disgusted. They were like me and Billy; not meant for one another. My nose tickled with what would've been tears and so I reached up to rub it. No tears came. My eyes didn't even water.

"Help with the boxes. That'd be so helpful of you, honey-bunny-bun." She said once she'd finished fanning. She leant forward to kiss the side of my head, her breath smelling strongly of copper – no, not copper, it couldn't smell like that; like blood. "I need to go lie down."

"Before I help - with the boxes - could I ask you both some questions first?"

Her eyes widened, allowing me to see just how red they were and for the first time I saw how tired she was. Her marble eyes, normally so clear, were streaked with red, and under them lay bags of purple skin, crow feet on the sides, her tanned skinned paler than normal and her cheeks hollowed.

"Oh well, I knew you'd want to talk some more about her sooner or later." She said, before eyeing Steven, her red-marble eyes narrowed and impatient for her husband to speak, to fucking say anything.

Drawing my lip into my mouth, I waited too. Steven's brow was furrowed. His forehead wrinkled deeply. The hair at his temples peppered with greys. When had Sarah and Steven gotten so old? Maybe it was somewhere between leaving us and getting fired, because I couldn't for the life of me remember seeing wrinkles on either of them before they last left.

Finally, Steven spoke, his voice quiet but not lacking any of the authority that it had always held, "Let's all sit down and then we can talk."

And less than a minute later, we sat in the living room. Sarah slumped back against the sofa while Steven sat pin straight, just as straight as Sarah's wine glass which stood on the coffee table between them and I. With my arms folded, I sat across from them, leg tapping on the cold colored carpet. The living room lights glowed like fire, giving the appearance of warmth. I shivered and crossed my legs. Maybe I should've worn jeans today and not a dress.

I pulled my 'TO ASK' list from my back pocket and held it out to them. They both reached out, and instead of touching Sarah, Steven recoiled almost unnoticeably, as if Sarah was a diseased corpse and he'd rather not touch it. Sarah took it from me and her lip curled as she read.

"Why are 'mom' and 'dad' in quote marks?"

'Dad' said. "I think she should be allowed to put 'mom' and 'dad' in

quotations."

'Mom' shot back. "But we raised her."

'Dad'. "From her perspective, we lied to her."

'Mom'. "To protect her."

"Maybe I should add that to my list." I shook my head.

"Add what?" Sarah asked.

"Who were you protecting me from?" I asked.

"Brunner." Steven replied. "Mostly."

I uncrossed my legs. "Mostly?"

"You real father was..." Sarah's lips pursed. "Well, he wasn't a very hunky dory kinda guy."

Steven quietly huffed. "He left your mother to fend for herself."

"To fend for herself?" I asked, "where were you? Also," I pointed at them, "if my real father left Clara, that would mean he didn't want me, therefore why would I need protection from him?"

Steven breathed in deeply. "Clara met Andrey-"

"His name is Andrey?"

Steven breathed in a sharp gust. "I'm going to give you the full story... so, no interruptions."

I nodded, impatient.

"They met when Clara was just sixteen. He was a teacher. She was in one of his classes at your high school. That's when their relationship started. Of course, your grandparents didn't know. And I was off handling accounts abroad with your mother- with my wife that year. When we came back to Hawkins, we finally settled into this house. Steve would've been about 8 or 9 months old and about that time, Clara turned seventeen and then she fell pregnant. Andrey left. Your

grandparents kicked her out. She came to us for help. And I suggested the lab."

"Did you know what they doing to those women and their babies?"

"I was new to the lab and I only worked with finances. I'd recently found out Clara was pregnant, so I asked around. Some of the men I worked with said that the tests were perhaps a bit unethical but not harmful to the baby in any way."

I sat forward. "What if they were harmful to the mother? Did you ask about that?"

"Of course. There were 'unharmful' side effects, is something to the effect of what I was told."

"Great." I tapped my foot with vigour and the coffee table between us shook and the blood-wine rippled as if a stone had been thrown in.

"As for your protection, Andrey's... Russian."

"Oh, so you didn't trust him... because he's Russian?" I scoffed. "I'm half Russian?" I hadn't meant to voice that.

"Yes, you are." Steven said, eyes on the floor.

"My little Russkiy!"* Sarah smiled an ugly smile and my stomach flooded with acidic disgust. My jaw clenched. My breath soared out of flared nostrils. The tapping of my leg stopped.

"So, next question." I gritted out. "He dead?"

Steven spoke. "We don't know."

"And Clara's..." the lump in my throat was hard to talk around. "... dead, right?"

His head tilted down less than an inch, eyes still on the floor. "Yes."

I wiped away a tear. "And after she died you took me in? Why did the lab let you take me? All those kids were basically stolen from their moms and experimented on for *years*. Why was I allowed to leave?"

"When a Harrington sues, we tend to win."

"You sued the lab?" Just like El's mom, but she wasn't a *Harrington*; Hawkins royalty. My stomach twisted, disgusted.

"I didn't, your grandfather did." His words caused a fucker of a headache to start throbbing behind my left eye.

"He kicks out- *abandons* his pregnant daughter but he'll sue for me? In his eyes, I was probably just a bastard baby girl? How does that make any sense?"

"I told him about the labs experiments. Personally, I suppose he didn't want anyone experimenting on a Harrington."

"So, you all knew *for years* what was going on in that place? Those children? Their poor mothers? None of you did anything about it?" My nose tingled; more tears were on their way. "You can sort the fucking boxes by yourselves." I stood up.

"Language!" They both said.

"What happened with my real father then?" My lip trembled. "Why would I need protection from someone who doesn't want me? And don't say because he was a Russian spy or whatever bullshit excuse you wanna use!"

"Clare!" Sarah scolded.

"Why!" I shouted. Sarah reached for her glass and downed it in one before dropping it to the table, not caring if it broke, which it didn't. It only landed on its side with a ding that made the headache behind my left eye throb with even more vigour. Steven didn't meet my eyes. They were fucking weak, and I couldn't deal with it- with *them* anymore. "I'm leaving."

"No, you're not, young lady. Look how dark it is out there." Sarah said, firm, despite the slurred words.

I shook my head. "I don't care."

...

*RUSSKEY (TOY): a type of dog. It's a cute dog but I heard someone use the term in The Walking Dead Game as derogatory toward a Russian character and since this is America during the cold war, I was like 'hey, imma use that'. I wouldn't actually refer to a Russian person as a 'russkey' but Sarah H (since she's basically my oc) would.

My rant is below. I apologise if you read it.

My opinion on season 3 Billy, an essay. Yes, an *essay* (because I wasn't happy)

I hated how they ended Billy's character. I thought we knew hardly anything new about him. And the 'new' stuff (like with his mom) was so badly done (and I know this is coming from a fanfic writer but c'mon, ACTUAL WRITERS could've done better with that exposition). I feel like season 3 should've been the getting-to-know-Billy season (like in season 2 we got to know Steve, who I hated in S1 but then in S2 Steve completely turned around and I thought 'hey maybe that'll be kind of what they do with S3 Billy' but nope) and then, if they still wanted to Kill Bill, they would've been able to kill him off in season 4 which would've been way more sad than it was in S3 coz we would hopefully have a fleshed out character who we *know*.

All we knew was he was basically the kid from IT called Henry coz seriously they are the same person (they both have a horrid father, a fast blue car and a freaking mullet like wtf) and bruhh, the way they revealed his mom and the past abuse was so cringe. TBH I thought the way I handle the abusive streak with his father was too much or written badly but it honestly gave me a confidence boost regarding my writing (I hope I don't sound cocky). And I also thought during ch7 of CW 'oh no, what if I've gone too far and Billy's not abused regularly'. Most people during that time would've had a slap from their mother or father, right? I've had a slap and I'm was born way after Billy. So, I thought, what if the show just doesn't take that route at all? But they did, and I feel like they could've done it better.

Neil was only in the flashbacks, which kind of sucked since he's

a great actor – so scary to watch. They wasted him. Just like Noah Schnapp was wasted in S1 lol.

It's fine if you liked it, but I just don't think anything will ever be as good as season 1. And I didn't even cry once, not even when fucking Hop died, which makes me feel like a bitch. Yeet.

IMPORTANT

DID ANYONE WANT TO KNOW WHY MAX AND BILLY ARE IN HAWKINS? REMEMBER THAT SCENE IN THE CAR (in S2) WHERE BILLY NEARLY RAN THE BOYS OVER? HE DID THAT BECAUSE HIM AND MAX WERE FIGHTING over why they were in Hawkins and they both blamed each other for it. I wanted to know what happened in California. Hell, I've written a 120k+ word long fanfiction because I couldn't stop thinking *why*. Did they give a reason in the show and I just wasn't paying attention? Let me know (coz honestly maybe I wasn't paying attention) plz and thank u.

Also, I don't hate the show or S3. I just was really annoyed with how they killed Billy off and I'm praying that Dacre just wanted to leave the show and that's why it wasn't so great.. but he was a fan of season 1 and in interviews he was so passionate when talking about acting as Billy. in an interview about what he wanted for season 3 regarding Billy, Dacre said Billy falling in love with someone would be a nice change of pace (and that interview is partly why I wrote this fic)... so him wanting to leave the show just doesn't make sense to me – but I don't know the guy and anything could've happened on set or in his personal life to make him wanna quit... if you come across any info on the subject let me know plz..

Maybe I'll get hate for the rant? I guess that's fine. Everyone deserves an opinion after all.

This all reminds me of how poopy the end of Game of thrones was.

Rant over

PLZ HELP: I feel like I need to change the synopsis for this story so if anyone could come up with something, I'd be so grateful coz honestly, I'm awful at them.

Thanks for reading!

26. Don't we all wish it was Friday?

I will get around to replying to everyone's reviews, but I felt like I should post this chapter first. The sooner it's up the better, right? It's a short one though.

Sorry if there are any mistakes. I only just finished writing it and I wasn't in the mood to edit my oofs.

26: Don't we all wish it was Friday?

Billy

My stupid fucking clock wasn't working. It hung on the wall above my shelf, next to a poster of a busty girl in a white bikini, with its hands frozen on three-oh-three. It needed batteries. What pissed me off about it was that the clock seemed to mock me; it was another thing that wasn't working. The thing I had with Clare – yes, a thing; a god damned boyfriend/girlfriend *thing* because I didn't know what the fuck to call it – was broken or turned to shit, dead. My role as a brother and as a son – yeah, that was fucked; I was the season my sister was six feet under in one those creepy 3'ft child coffins and because of that my mom 'went to sleep' (or that's what her tombstone read) and I had the black and blue receipts to prove that Neil fucking hated me.

I reached up and took the clock down, wondering which three-oh-three it had stopped at. Was it three-oh-three AM last night when I'd gotten back to the house **without Max** and nursed a bruise on my shin that wasn't from Steve bleeding Harrington? Was it three-oh-three PM today when I'd been thinking about finding Clare and apologizing?

Yeah good job with that by the way! The voice laughed. If the voice had a face, it would have the widest smile right now, one filled with yellowed rotting teeth. Despite that mental image, I couldn't help but agree with it. My fingers tightened on the clock. *For fucks sake. She'd been so fucking annoying. So fucking difficult. Such a-*

Bitch

Yes, a bitch. I threw the clock onto my bed, needing to be rid of the electric anger that jolted through my veins as if they were power cords. The gentle thud it made as it landed on the bed wasn't enough – not enough, not enough, it wasn't good enough – so I picked it up and tossed it at the wall. Like thunder, it crashed. Parts splintered and spattered away into tiny pieces as they landed with tinny taps along the oak floor. Neil was showering, he couldn't have heard that.

My fingers twitched.

You need to punch something.

I know.

A knock on glass came from behind. I spun and saw *her*, that bloody princess, stood outside my window with a red umbrella overhead. The rain was thick as if it couldn't decide whether it wanted to be snow or rain. It was sleet. Heavy icy stuff that Susan – a seasoned Canadian who'd seen more than two dozen snowfalls in her life – had warned Max about. I'd overheard their conversation; it wasn't like Susan to warn me of anything. She either thought I wasn't worth warning, or I wasn't hers to warn.

Clare tapped the window again, breathing out a white steam into the cold blackness of night surrounding her. Her cheeks were red. Her eyes were red too, and damp. Despite how angry I was, my fingers stopped twitching. Seeing her made the anger flow away like muddied leaves down a storm drain. I wanted to be mad at her for having this affect on me, for being someone I just couldn't stay mad at, and I tried to get angry in that moment. I really did. I tried to think of the way she thought she knew best and wanted to tell that fat cop that I was some pussy beaten by his ex-army dad, the way she always talked back to me like Max, the way she bit her lip when she was concentrating or nervous, the way she had made me care – only then to break up with me.

Flexing my fingers, I walked over to the window and slid it up. Up until that point I had been unaware of the storm outside my bungalow. Opening the window was like swimming to the surface;

your ears no longer clogged with water, no longer pattered at by fogged and sloshy sound. There was deaf-silence, and then there wasn't. Sleet battered rooftops and windows and ice-covered roads; trees swayed, frozen branches clattered and snapped, clapping as they landed; ice once new and white but now muddied and melted rushed rapidly down grey gutters and swirled through storm drains. And Clare stood amongst all that noise waiting for me to speak.

"The fuck do you want?" I leant on the windowsill, not caring if the sleet hit me.

Her eyebrows sweetly arched up. "I'll just leave then, shall I?"

"No!" My breath, white and cloudlike, huffed out. "I'm being..."

Stupid.

"...a jerk?" Clare answered, lip trembling.

I didn't know whose answer I preferred, so instead of answering, I nodded.

"Want to come in?" I asked.

She nodded, big brown eyes sparkling. Her inner Bambi was really coming out tonight.

She closed her umbrella and handed it to me. It was one of those long cane like one, and it reminded me of my grandfather's. I placed it by the side of my door knowing but not quite caring that it would leave a puddle on the oak floor. I walked back to the window where Clare was trying to pull herself up. Her arms gave and her feet crunched against the gravel that lined the house for about a foot. I held out a hand and couldn't help but smile as she placed hers in mine. I was still amazed at how small her hand was in mine, but I had to put this thought aside and warn her.

"My dad's here. So we have to be quiet."

"Of course." She nodded.

I pulled her in over the wet windowsill and helped steady her on

floor, her boots squelching and squeaking like balloons being rubbed together by a clown.

It was then I really took in her appearance. Her arms were wrapped around her shoulders, which were only covered by a striped cardigan. Her dress lay limp around her knees like a heavy curtain. Her hair was soaked through; black with wetness despite the umbrella. My hands settled on her shoulders and rubbed up and down, hoping to create warmth – which wasn't possible if she was still in her wet clothes. Her eyes met mine, I looked away. *Pussy*.

My eyes landed on my right hand, still bruised with a gash running up my index finger, right on the knuckle – evidence of the fight with King Steve. It hurt like a bitch whenever I bent that finger. Suddenly crushed under a wave of guilt – pathetic and slimy *guilt* – I brought my hands away from her. I walked to the window and slid it shut and the noise from the outside stopped. A tangible silence fell.

"What happened to your... uh, was it a clock?" She asked, voice soft. Its softness made my shoulders tense. I turned to find her eyes on it; the victim of my tantrum; the cogs and screws and plastic dish sprawled out like severed body parts that would later be outlined with white paint by CSI guys.

"It broke." I said.

"I see that."

"I'll get you some clothes and a towel." I said, voice full of slate. "And then you can tell me why you decided to bless me with your presence."

I left the room, tightly closed the door behind me and went to the airing cupboard – which was right next to the bathroom Neil was in. The water had stopped running and my heart was hammering. Was he still in there? Or was he somewhere about the house waiting for me to fuck up? Technically, I already had by letting Clare in. It was only a matter of time before he found out, where that meant ten minutes from now or ten hours. But despite whatever punishment I got – or wherever on my body the punishment was dealt to – I was proud that I could help Clare. Even if she was annoying.

Upon opening the door, heat from the boiler settled into my skin like heat from the sun. I was homesick. Hawkins was always so cold, nothing like Cali.

I sorted through the mess of clothes that made up the ironing pile and found one of my old long-sleeved tees, some old sweatpants and a towel. I carried on into Max's room.

"Hey! Knock!" She said, yanking her headphones from her head. Pop blared from the mini speakers. Her night light was on as she read a magazine, one with a smiling 'heartthrob' on the cover, his abs glistening. I offhandedly wondered if he'd ever got the shit kicked out of him before. Then I wondered if it had been his old man doing the kicking. Probably not. ***Fucking Fabio.***

"I need socks." I said.

Her face scrunched up.

"Please, Mad Max. I'll explain on the way to school tomorrow, 'kay?"

"You're so weird." She said, getting up from her bed. She opened her wardrobe and pulled out a pair of fluffy purple 'FRIDAY' socks and walked over to me. She held them out and I eyed them with mock cautiousness.

"But it's Monday." I said, smirking.

She shoved them into my chest and I took them, laughing lightly as she rolled her eyes and tumbled into bed, distractedly putting her headphones on as she disappeared back into her magazine. I exited the room, closed the door and ran straight into something- someone. Neil.

.

.

.

.

Next chapter is gonna b SPICY boiii

I forgot to mention that Billy being a lifeguard in S3 fits with this story (y'know, coz in this fic his little sister drowned). Kind of bittersweet.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter!